

Riparian Notes

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The Main Thing

What are some of the things that you appreciate and value about creeks and riparian areas? Your list may include some of the following values:

- The fisherman wants diverse aquatic habitat and healthy fish populations.
- The rancher values productive and high quality forage and clean water for livestock.
- The duck hunter may want good nesting cavities and mast production for wood ducks.
- The canoeist wants desirable channel characteristics, shade, and base flow for paddling.
- The urban masses want places to wade and swim and splash with good quality water.
- Downstream communities want adequate supplies of clean water and reduced flooding.
- The turkey enthusiast wants healthy riparian bottomlands and old growth hardwoods for key roost sites.
- The bird watcher wants the greatest diversity of vegetation and channel characteristics for the greatest variety and abundance of birdlife.
- The prospective land buyer wants natural beauty, running water, and a place to avoid the urban masses.

When it comes to sorting out the priorities in life, my Mom gives some good advice. This advice applies equally well to riparian priorities and other natural resource issues:

“The Main Thing, is to keep the Main Thing, the Main Thing”

As important as riparian and creek values are, they are not the Main Thing. The Main Thing in riparian areas is not so much the diverse values that we appreciate, but the physical functions which produce those values. The definition which summarizes the function of creek and riparian areas comes from the PFC (Proper Functioning Condition) assessment technique:

A properly functioning riparian area can be described as having adequate vegetation, landform or large woody debris to: dissipate the energy of floodwater; reduce erosion; stabilize banks; trap sediment; develop floodplains; provide flood-water retention; provide ground-water recharge; and provide water storage in banks and floodplains.

When adequate vegetation, landform and large logs are present in a riparian area to produce the physical functions described above, the values we desire will be maintained or restored according to the natural potential for the site. Mom’s advice is good for life in general, and good for riparian areas.