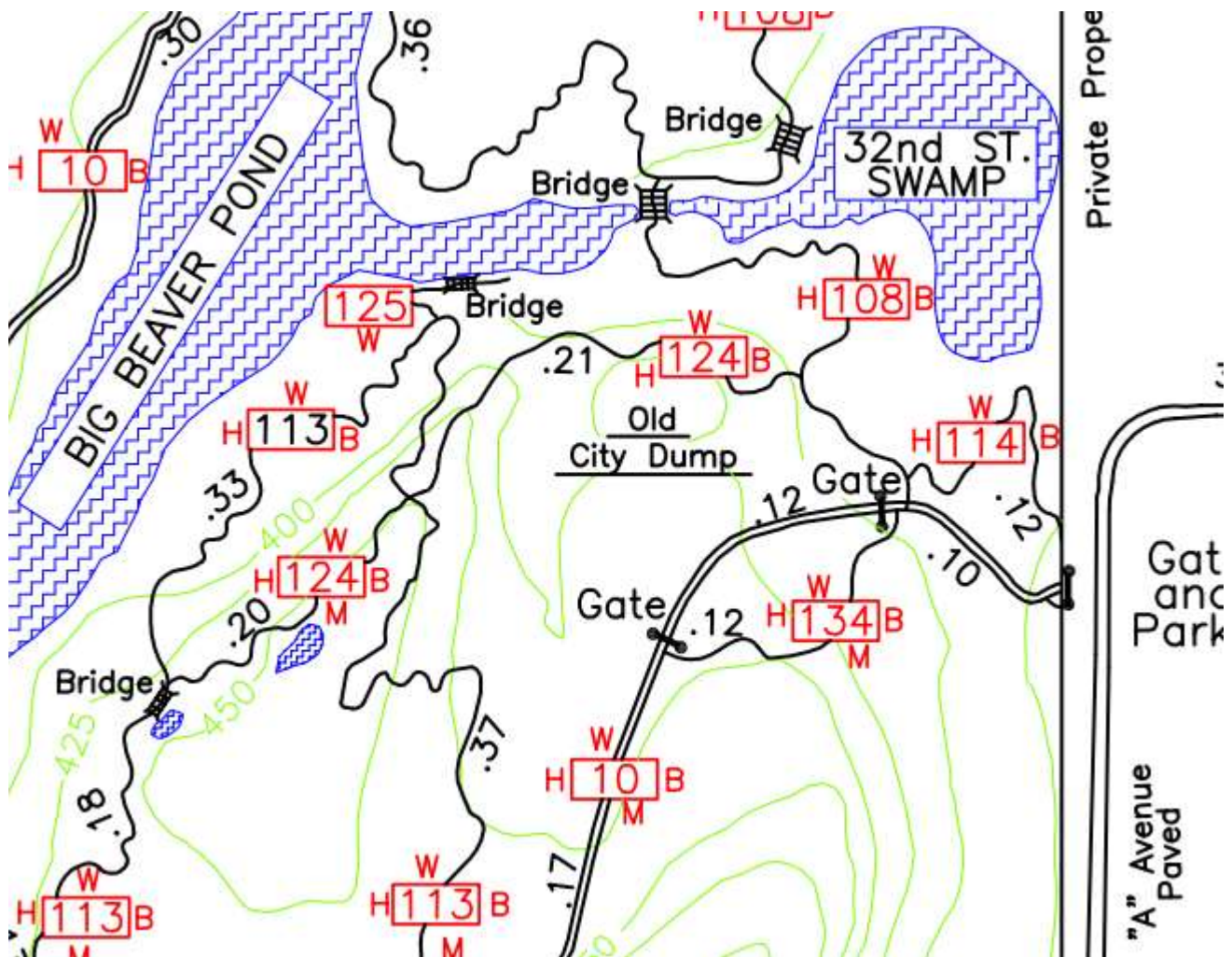


What I Found When I Walked Old City Dump Creek

Bob Jepperson – May 2, 2020

One of Anacortes' most precious assets is the 2,800-acre sanctuary known as the ACFL or Anacortes Community Forest Lands. Over the past decade, I have walked the trails of the forest lands nearly every day, sometimes three times a day during what I call "the high drama seasons." Over the years, I've come to realize the uniqueness of the ACFL, but fresh eyes see it even more clearly. Out-of-state visitors usually say the same thing: "We have nothing like this. We have parks back home, but we don't have a large, unspoiled natural area." Hundreds of local walkers, dog walkers, and bike riders feel the same way; they appreciate having a place where they can get away from the city and experience the completely different world that nature creates.

Those who enter that world from the A Avenue trailhead walk fewer than one thousand feet before seeing the chain link fence that keeps them off a site described on ACFL maps as the "Old City Dump." Over a decade ago, the landfill was covered with a protective "cap" and planted in grass. To prevent trees and deep rooting plants from penetrating the cap, the City of Anacortes maintains the site as a meadow by mowing the grass twice a year.



My daily visits to the ACFL focus on getting to know our wild neighbors who live there, but like everyone who walks Trail 10, I respect the fence that separates trail users from the Old City Dump. Because I never walk onto the meadow - the largest meadow in the entire 2,800 acres of the ACFL - I am not familiar with the community of species who live there. All I see are the large species such as the deer, coyote, and the Great Horned or Barred Owls which graze or hunt that meadow every night year-round. The capped landfill is currently healing, awaiting the time when officials deem it safe to allow the area to be reclaimed by forest. In the meantime, the meadow serves a useful purpose, one that is in keeping with the rest of the ACFL. Species large and small rely on the meadow as an important place to make a living.



A young owl hunts at the wooded margin of the meadow that once was the Old City Dump.

ACFL trail users paid little attention to the capped landfill until the Anacortes Parks Department proposed building a bike skills park on top of the Old City Dump. Now a great deal of attention has focused on understanding the history and health of the site. Over recent months, a dozen letters to the editor have been published in the Anacortes American and scores of emails have been sent to members of Anacortes boards, commissions and council, each one pointing out the lack of wisdom in the proposal.

Considering all the new attention directed toward the meadow behind the chain link fence, I thought, "I better go look at this place." I wanted to visit the area before owl nesting season began, so I walked the entire area in late February 2020. (As I write this on May 2, 2020, a pair of owls is nesting on one margin of the Old City Dump.)

On the day of my visit, I walked just beyond the chain link fence, stepped off the right side of Trail 10 and walked a short distance to a precipice. Below, I saw a wet basin where water collects, water that runs off the capped landfill and the surrounding watershed. Ponds form in the basin and create a creek during the rainy season. The creek, which I refer to as Old City Dump Creek, flows under Trail 124 and continues through the forest, crossing under Trail 108 on its way to the 32nd Street Swamp.



The flanks of two sides of the old landfill erode and expose a never-ending supply of garbage that tumbles downslope into the ponds that feed Old City Dump Creek.



Relics that once served a useful purpose come to rest where water collects, and some items such as a chest freezer and car and truck tires hold pools of water that mosquitoes use as breeding sites. But the large items of trash only represent the tip of the garbage iceberg.





As I walked farther, I entered an extensive area of garbage next to and beyond the ponds. At first, I thought I might be witnessing a bad case of littering, but the farther I walked, the denser the garbage became. I realized that nearly the entire flood plain of Old City Dump Creek consists of garbage – glass bottles and jugs (some broken, some still intact), sheets of plastic that are fracturing into smaller pieces, plastic bottles, and metal objects. Years of accumulated leaves, twigs and moss now cover much of the area, but each of my footsteps landed on garbage, some of it exposed, some lying just beneath the thin layer of organic debris that covers it.



I found it difficult to photograph the true extent of the garbage. In the photos, what looks like a littered forest floor is actually a garbage dump with trees and shrubs emerging through it. The carpet of garbage goes on and on – thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of bottles and small objects. I picked up one bottle, and another lay beneath it. I found it difficult to avoid stepping on broken or unbroken bottles.

As I walked toward the creek, I assumed that the garbage deposits would end before I reached the creek, but no, the garbage not only extends to the other side of the creek, it creeps up the far side of the creek's valley. There is little land on the creek's flood plain that is not garbage. Rainfall soaks into the trash and either flows toward the creek on the surface from the ponds, or subsurface water flows through garbage on its way to the creek. The water in Old City Dump Creek collects in a basin of garbage, and the creek flows through garbage; it has no alternative course.



Looking up Old City Dump Creek from Trail 124. The creek bank in the distant center of the photo consists entirely of garbage.



I stood on the creek bank and looked down at orange-colored water. Just above the old lawn mower, water oozes from the garbage and enters the main flow of Old City Dump Creek.

I walked a straight line for 250 feet across wet trash before I stood on clean forest soil. If an area 200 feet by 200 feet is roughly one acre in size, the uncapped garbage in the creek's flood plain covers more than one acre, possibly considerably more.

Ground dwelling amphibians, birds and mammals live in the flood plain. In human terms, they live in the most dangerous neighborhood in the city. Many of those species burrow into the ground. If anyone were to drive a wheeled vehicle over the area; the tires would break thousands of bottles and jars, creating a hazardous minefield of razor-sharp glass waiting to cut the residents of our forest lands.

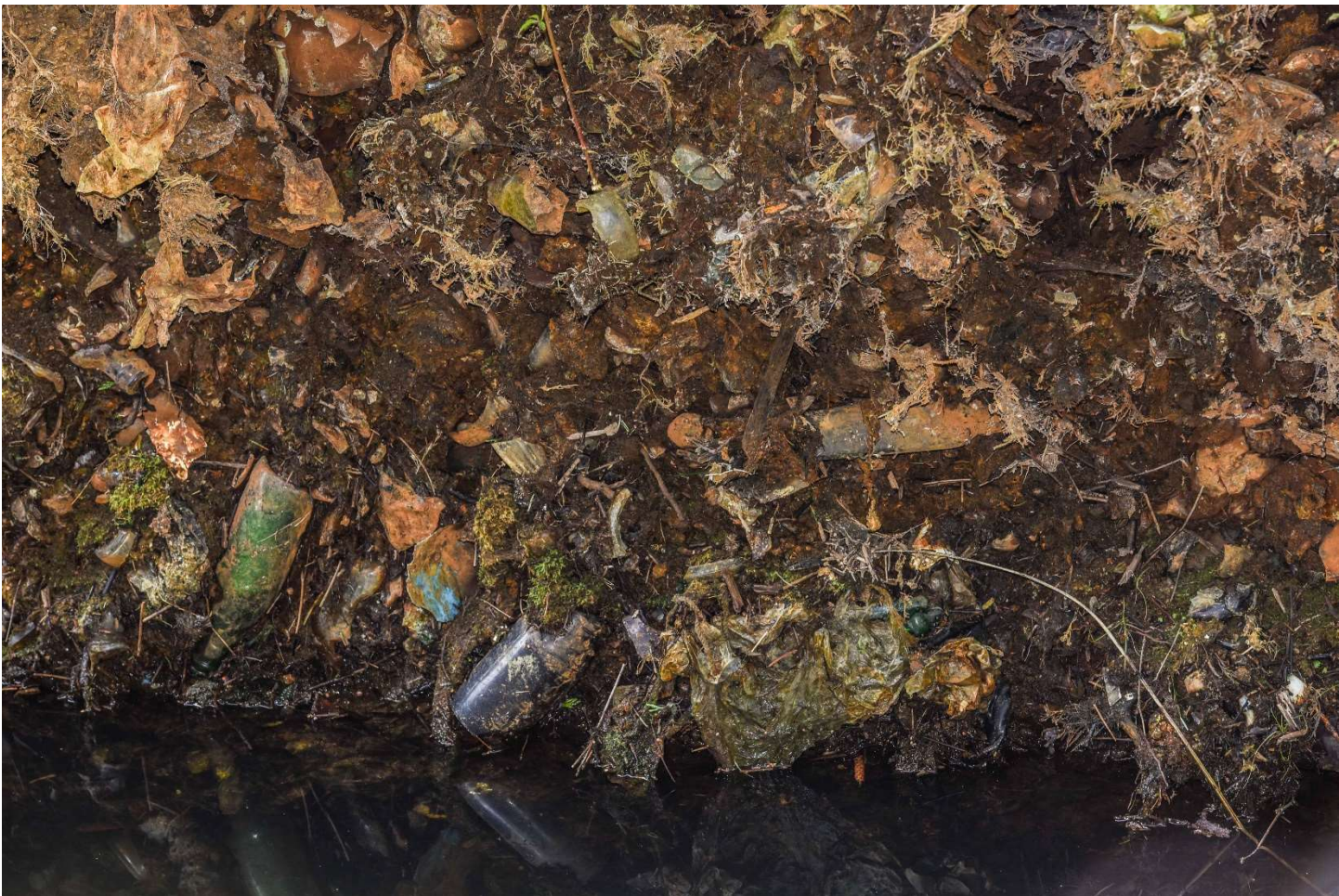
Unlike the capped landfill on high ground, trees have been allowed to grow in the garbage of the creek's flood plain. Most of them are red alder trees. I stood in one place and counted 79 trees growing through the trash. Some of the trees are quite large. They sprouted in the garbage and have spent their lives growing in garbage.

A few trees have fallen over, and their upturned roots show us something about the depth of the garbage in which the trees grew. In one location, four red alder trees lie side by side on the trash.



One alder displays its upturned roots as a vertical wall, over 20 feet wide by almost 10 feet tall, still holding onto the garbage in which the roots grew. Embedded in the wall of roots are glass bottles; some intact, some broken; plastic bottles; a coffee cup; pieces of rusting metal; sheets of plastic and garbage bags; plastic pipes; an inner tube; ceramic dinnerware; a radiator hose; clay pots; etc. Where the tree once stood, there is now a depression filled with colored water.





A warning: I would discourage anyone from taking the same walk I took. It is not a safe place to go. I wore heavy rubber boots with thick soles, but I walked over more than an acre of glass – some of it broken – and sharp scraps of metal. Some of the glass shows at the surface, but most of it lies out of sight beneath a thin accumulation of moss, sticks and decaying leaves.

In one hand I carried my camera. In the other hand, I should have held a walking stick or trekking pole for balance, but I had no way of anticipating what I would find, not in my wildest imagination. At one point, I walked through a wet, slimy area, and I almost fell, stopping myself short of the ground with my left hand. Fortunately, my hand landed where there was no broken glass. I should have worn heavy leather gloves. One cannot avoid the glass; it is everywhere, under every step, over a large area of uncapped garbage.

After ten years of daily treks along Trails 10 and 124, I have never seen any humans venture into the flood plain of the creek. In fact, I have never seen humans on the grassy capped area that covers the elevated portion of the Old City Dump. Just a simple chain link fence reminds us that the capped portion is resting and healing from a past mistake, the same mistake that most communities made; they filled low areas with garbage, the same low areas where water goes.

Little has changed in the decade since part of the garbage dump was capped. Rain still falls on the grass-covered meadow on high ground and flows down the uncapped banks of dirt and garbage into Old City Dump Creek's flood plain where ponds form on the surface. During the rainy season, a creek begins to flow. This year, our dry autumn delayed the process. Not until late November did the creek show signs of flowing, but by December 15 the creek was running strongly under Trail 124. Sometime this spring or early summer, as rainfalls diminish, the creek will cease flowing.

A few months ago, a local citizen visited the capped landfill, noticed problems, and notified the Washington Department of Ecology. In November of 2019, a WDOE investigator visited the site, and reported:

“Based on a review of available information, I recommend rescinding the no further action determination. Recommendation: Re-list the Site on the Confirmed and Contaminated Sites List.”

Those who enter the Anacortes Community Forest Lands from the A Avenue trailhead see a large meadow behind a chain link fence. What they do not see is the uncapped portion of the Old City Dump site, the watershed and riparian zone of Old City Dump Creek. If they saw what I saw, they would find it deeply disturbing.

The few photos and text that I am sharing with you do not adequately show what I found. To remove the large items like tires and old appliances would require careful

work in a sensitive area, but a bigger challenge remains, the challenge of cleaning up the flood plain of Old City Dump Creek.

The contaminated area is managed by the Anacortes Parks and Recreation Department. Some city employees no doubt know about this mess within our forest lands. Who was in charge when the dump was closed but not entirely cleaned up and capped? And, would this mess have been allowed to fester for so many years if the citizens of Anacortes who visit and care about the ACFL had known about it?