

Historical Perspectives on Native Plant Restoration in the North Davis Channel

Land stewardship is a long-term commitment to care for and nurture a landscape to guide it in becoming and remaining a vibrant, sustainable habitat that supports diverse plant and animal communities while providing an enriching environment for people.

The Friends of the North Davis Channel (FNDC), formed in 2019 and led by Certified California Naturalist Eric Newman, has embraced that commitment and has been exemplary in its several years of stewardship of the channel, fondly known as the Davis Ditch.

That volunteer stewardship is caring for and enhancing a biologically complex linear habitat extending more than 1.25 miles within and along the edge of the channel. This community-based volunteer work is nurturing a climate ready urban forest from Sycamore Lane to F Street.

To grasp the amazing transformation, the FNDC and preceding efforts initiated in 2010-2012, have achieved, one needs to consider that the channel is an entirely artificial creation dug into the ground by heavy earth moving equipment to provide a stormwater conveyance and agricultural runoff channel around the north edge of the City. After construction, the channel was populated by invasive annual grasses and lined with eucalyptus trees.

In 2012, using funding from a state grant, the City of Davis, the Yolo County Resource Conservation District and Putah Creek Council began transforming the channel banks by planting hundreds of native drought hardy trees and shrubs with the help of hundreds of hours of community volunteer work. Also, in 2013, a UC Davis Entomology Professor led the planting of hundreds of milkweed plants which provide food and breeding habitat for monarch butterflies.

After a several year plant establishment period, volunteer efforts shifted to sustaining and expanding the initial habitat creation through informal community member volunteer work to continue enhancing and sustaining the initial native plant restoration project.

In 2019 these informal community-based volunteer efforts coalesced into the formation of the FNDC and, in 2021, a formal agreement between the City and FNDC, focused the Friends work on a 3 acre native plant restoration area between the Kestrel Place footbridge on the West to Bird Entry Park on the East. Within the project area alone, the FNDC has planted at least a hundred additional climate ready trees of various native species, as well as scores of native shrubs and other native plants.

This work has been supported through numerous community financial donations which have funded the purchase of the native trees, shrubs, herbs, wildflowers and other native plants, as well as the purchase of necessary gardening equipment.

The backbone of this re-wilding project has been at least 30 to 40 volunteer community gardeners recruited by FNDC. Literally hundreds of volunteer hours have been devoted each year since 2019 in planting, watering and caring for the new native trees, shrubs and other native plants. One particularly amazing aspect of this work has been the planting of around 40 valley oaks, that over the years will grow into a fabulous oak tree promenade along about a 400 foot stretch along the pathway at the bottom of the channel within the FNDC project area.

Since 2023, the work of the FNDC began to shift from new planting to maintaining existing plants, plant replacement, other garden enhancements, removal of non-native invasive species, provision of interpretive displays and removal of trash and debris washed in from nearby homeless encampments during storm events. FNDC has also begun improving the bike path gardens and Bird Entry Park adjacent to the Ditch with native trees, shrubs and other native plants.

Walking along the trail at the bottom of the ditch today one has to marvel at this community jewel. A vast and verdant 10 acre nature park. The Channel, which began in the mid 1980's as a relatively treeless stormwater drainage utility, now supports an impressive canopy of trees planted in the initial grant funded work and later the more focused project area work of FNDC. The Ditch will continue to be a community treasure for decades to come and is a testament to what people can achieve through vision, collective effort and a powerful stewardship ethos. This nature park is enjoyed daily by hundreds of community visitors, including hikers, bikers, joggers, photographers, students and nature lovers and others. The tree canopy continues to grow from seeds and acorns dropped by squirrels and jays and seeds blown in by the wind, which can now take root under a well established existing tree canopy.

Substantial early work between 2010 and 2017 was critical in creating this wonderful nature area, now full of native and non-native trees and shrubs. The FNDC has worked tirelessly to enhance and maintain that early effort. And has been intensely engaged in a 3 acre project area and adjacent City park areas to continue vigorously supporting that early work. Over time that project area may be expanded through amendments to its agreement with the City of Davis.