



Preserving Riparian Areas

A riparian area is the place where the land and water meet and can be recognized by the unique combination of plants and animals that live there. This distinct habitat is the site of many interactions between river and bank that are vital to maintaining a variety of species. Riparian areas also provide numerous beneficial functions that support a healthy environment. Preserving and enhancing these important ecological features is a crucial land stewardship activity.

Riparian areas provide a variety of functions including filtering and reducing pollution into streams, reducing erosion, providing wildlife habitat, and creating shade to control water temperature. The distinct soil and vegetation form a network of roots and ground cover that intercepts runoff from upland areas and stabilizes the river bank. Riparian areas also capture rushing flood waters and slow them down so contaminants can be filtered out and water can be absorbed into the soil.

Given all of these benefits, why don't we see more riparian areas preserved in a natural state? The very features that make these zones so beneficial to the environment are the same ones that make them vulnerable to development. People have long relied on riparian areas for the abundant food, water, and material resources they supplied. Riparian areas also provided transportation corridors for travel by boat, and were often the only flat land areas suitable for building roads, farms and cities. For these reasons, many riparian areas are among the most densely populated of urban regions. Not to mention, the monetary value of businesses and homes greatly increases if you can claim a "waterfront view." However, there are practices that land owners can implement to manage riparian areas that will benefit the entire watershed.

If you are lucky enough to own land beside a lake, river, or creek, you may want to consider leaving a buffer strip of "natural area" along the waterway. This is a great first step to preserving your riparian area. Manicured lawns that contain closely cropped carpet grass up to the water's edge may give you an unobstructed view, but these plants do not provide any of the benefits of a healthy and functioning riparian area. Proper use and disposal of hazardous substances like chemicals, fertilizers, paint, and oil is even more important in these zones adjacent to water bodies. If you own a farm, or even a hobby farm, try to keep your animals from trampling the riparian vegetation. One way to protect the riparian zone from animals is by installing fences or providing alternate watering facilities.

There are numerous benefits to protecting and restoring riparian areas from their ability to filter runoff and stabilize river banks to the important role they play in supporting healthy fish and wildlife populations. Implementing practices that support healthy riparian areas is a necessary component of watershed stewardship. UGRA supplies a field guide to riparian plants to anyone interested in learning more about riparian areas and the function of the vegetation they support. Please contact me to obtain your copy today.

Let's Keep Our River Clean

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