

A day in the life of a ditch mapper, ... er, I mean S.H.I.M. mapper.

The morning broke without any hesitation, a full half-hour early it seemed, for the entire working world looked to be running a little behind. The streets of Langley looked like they were now the proposed site of the next Indy as people rushed back and forth going about their daily routines. As we drove up the hill the light fog reluctantly gave away to the most glorious of dawns and I could tell it was going to be another wonderful day of discovery in the Little Campbell River Watershed.

Arriving at the office my partner and I prepared our gear and quickly printed an out of date master legal, our only sense of direction in the field. One must rely on his own sense of intuition and prose as he soon discovers how completely useless a map is when surrounded by unforgiving wetland vegetation. Thankfully a compass is mandatory equipment when heading into the wilderness, and after all isn't it a bit embarrassing to get lost when you're supposed to be a professional mapper?

When leaving the safety and warmth of the office with mandatory coffee in hand, along with the anticipation of staying alive and dry throughout the day, the noble stream mapper has to realise a few truths about the next few hours of his life. One, although he may be in his own mind the hardest surveyor the world has ever seen since the days of Columbus, there may be a point in the day where he or she might not be able to take the stresses of this task, and a short breakdown may take place. It may be several hundred metres into wetland engulfed in a sea of hard hack or just beyond the safety of a garden gate when you courageously realise the owner's not so happy dogs have smelled you out.

The second truth the inspiring habitat surveyor must come to terms with is that not all sections of the watershed will be able to be mapped in their entirety in a single day. Stream mappers conduct their work far from the hustle and bustle of the city. Every moment spent in the wilderness is a new experience, each more unpredictable than the next. One moment your walking through a beautiful natural landscape free from the stresses of daily life, and the next your up to your chest in the middle of a swamp sinking fast with no hope of escape. One must always be ready to take flight, be it from a charging bull...an irate land owner...or your own partner. We SHIM mappers do not consider the "fight" in the "fight or flight" theory to be supported or even an option when faced with 2 angry alsatians. Taking a stitch for a ditch is out of the question on our wages.

The third truth, and also the most disappointing complication to the SHIM mapper is that there may be some land owners that may not be as understanding as one would hope and disagree with your objective and "classification" of the stream that runs so innocent through their property. Unfortunately to some people the way they conduct themselves on "their property" is not open to discussion. Even if they've cleared all vegetation in the riparian zone and culverted the entire stream, it is still "their" property and they must be approached on their terms. Meeting with these people face to face is an eye opening experience and thankfully not all problems we see are a result of belligerence by the landowner. The idea of private land ownership is of particular concern to us. A watershed is cut up among hundreds of people with their own ideas on how their property is to be managed. To some people it means they can do whatever they want whenever they want without regard to their neighbours, wildlife or the environment. You learn very quickly that arguing your point of view with a stubborn landowner no matter how ridiculous you think their comments may be is almost always pointless. No matter how strongly you may disagree with their actions, and ideology, you always have to remember to show them the respect they deserve as a fellow human being.

From the truck you could see that our tributary ran through a few acres of open field and the first hour of our S.H.I.M survey looked to be almost pleasant. Our start point was as simple and straightforward as could be. After taking several pieces of critical data such as temperatures, wetted widths and depths along with substrate compositions the lead chain makes his or her way upstream to the next location or feature. From this point a distance and bearing is taken with a compass and gradient and other comments are also noted. If we were a wealthy non profit organisation much of this could be done quickly and with more accuracy using a G.P.S.unit, (a global positioning system that receives satellite transmissions and uses trigonometry to locate a point) but for today on this budget tight chain and compass will have to suffice. We happily mapped everything from the irrigation pond on ...to a small PVC pipe with an unknown origin until lunch, being careful to note as much data and any changes in the vegetation that borders the banks as possible.

And just when you think you can't go on and you contemplate the point of this seemingly futile exercise you see them. There they were under the rooted cutbank, two adult salmon, a male and a female side by side waiting for the rain, with most of their troubles behind them. And you realise why you're out here facing the elements while the rest of the world is content to stay warm and dry inside behind their desks. For the truth is out there, and as a stream mapper one has a chance to experience what is left of the wonderful natural environment. We have had to face the reality that we as a society are stewards of this world, and have seen up close the effects of our own arrogant attitude towards the environment. Fortunately the fate of the few salmon that do make to trip back to their origins in Langley is not sealed. It is not too late to change our egotistical view of our place in the world. And come to terms with the fact that the fate of the salmon and the fate of our society are one and the same.