

FIRST SALMON

PUD outreach stresses protection of water resources

By Jim Boldt

Every fall, Debbie Thomas takes small groups of Kitsap County fourth graders to Dogfish Creek where they wait patiently to catch a glimpse of chum salmon returning to spawn.

Though the stream is just a few miles from a busy state highway, there are no sounds of traffic. The nearby cities are also quiet. Very little light penetrates the shrubs and trees. On this trip, the overcast sky contributes to the subdued quality of light and sound.

After 15 years, Thomas knows her students will stay patient only so long. They will become restless if the fish don't appear. She watches their faces as much as she does the shallow bend in the waterway to see which one of the kids will spot the first salmon.

Then, almost in slow motion, the water begins to foam as a salmon struggles against the current on its way upstream. The tail

whips back and forth. The first small finger points in the direction of the salmon and a high pitched voice shouts out "there's one." A dozen heads turn in the same direction.

Thomas, water education and conservation manager for the Kitsap County PUD, is again rewarded by the smiles, the big eyes, and the youthful curiosity.

"It never gets old," Thomas says, flashing a smile of her own. "I love to see it every

fall. The look on their faces ... and then they break into telling each other descriptions of the swimming salmon."

It is Thomas' personal version of the traditional First Salmon ceremonies that many Northwest tribes held to celebrate the return of the salmon and show their thanks for all the benefits that came from the fish.

Chum salmon – also known as dogfish for the canine-like teeth in the males – are the only wild salmon that still spawn on the Kitsap Peninsula. With their hooked jaws and the greenish yellow color acquired before spawning, they look "beat up" by the time they reach the creek, according to Thomas. Male salmon also engage in ritualized fights for the right to spawn with the females. Chum salmon were prized by Native Americans because their flesh is

well-suited for smoking.

Thomas was a volunteer with the Kitsap County Water Watchers, a now defunct group whose original purpose was to protect the water resources of the county, when she started a program for "junior water watchers." Two years later, Kitsap PUD offered her a job to continue her work with the Kitsap schools and manage the PUD's water conservation program.

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Debbie Thomas studies a butterfly with Jonathon Rider (left) and Evan Neims.

"I didn't hear the word 'stewardship' or 'conservation' until I was out of high school," Thomas said, sitting in an office now crowded with brochures and class outlines from more than a decade of teaching. "I figured if I could do something to foster civic responsibly, particularly in young people, the kids would grow up knowing the importance of caring about their world and who and what lives in it," she added. "I also knew that they would go home and share that concern with others, including their parents, and their parents are the PUD's customers."

Kitsap PUD Manager Dave Siburg said the education program fits well with the PUD's broader effort to help manage the county's water resources. As a water utility, the PUD relies on groundwater resources to serve more than 12,000 households and

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nearly 900 commercial customers. Siburg noted that Kitsap is one of just two counties in Washington, that doesn't get any fresh-water resources from mountain snowmelt. The other is Island County.

"I think that has heightened our awareness of the need to monitor and manage the resources that we have," Siburg said.

With the support of the PUD, Thomas has expanded her original volunteer work with the "junior water watchers" into a science curriculum – known as the "Watershed Kit" – that has been adopted by most of the county's grade schools.



Debbie Thomas

Working with other water utilities, she also took a lead role in creating an annual "Water Wonders" day camp for elementary school

students and the annual "Kitsap Water Festival" at Olympic College, again targeting fourth graders. Thomas, a graduate of Western Washington University in Bellingham, also teaches other classes, from pre-school to high school, and adult programs, such as Master Gardeners, and serves on the state Department of Health's Water Use Efficiency Advisory Committee.

"It's all about connections," Thomas said. "It's important to show how our water resources are connected – streams, wells, our drinking water, even Puget Sound. It's also about demonstrating the connection between human activities and the quality of their drinking water, so people will value their water and not waste it."

As for her work with children, she said it was important from the start to get them "out in nature." "I knew if it was just a class, or just a science project inside the room, it

would not stick," Thomas said. "They had to see it, and feel it, and get wet and muddy and walk with me through the leaves and wait there on the bank."

Once the kids actually see the salmon for themselves, "I can go back to the classroom and pull it all together," she said. "After that

first look, I can start with the rain and show them where it goes into the ground and how it forms a stream and heads for the Puget Sound. I know they get it then."

Last year, Thomas received a special award for her efforts from the Washington Association of Sewer and Water Districts,

the first time that group has ever recognized someone outside a water or sewer program. The award was presented in December at the Washington PUD Association annual meeting. ☐

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