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## Restoring Tarboo Creek offers a model for saving Puget Sound

Through a combination of hard work, salesmanship and money both private and public, a small group of conservationists is restoring Tarboo Creek in hopes of creating a model for saving Puget Sound.

By [Seattle Times Staff](#)

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The Yarr farm doesn't look like much.

White paint peels from the sides of the old barn. Dust covers the concrete floors where cows once waited to be milked. A flat spot on a small hill is all that's left of the farmhouse, which burned down decades ago. Acres of waist-high weeds bend to the autumn wind.

But Peter Bahls sees possibilities.

He can see old-growth Sitka spruce towering above a small creek where coho salmon come with the winter rains to spawn. He imagines marshes filled with the croak of western toads, ponds echoing with the slap of beaver tails and the cry of bald eagles.

"It's a real opportunity to restore a whole floodplain," he says, staring across the field.

Look closer, and already signs of change are emerging.

The stream, straightened over decades to make way for plows, weaves back and forth again. Logs crisscross the water, shading schools of tiny coho. Small plastic banners flap from a few of the 50,000 thin young trees planted six months earlier — a forest in waiting.

The revival of Tarboo Creek, in a small valley feeding into Hood Canal, the slender western arm of Puget Sound, is the story of a few dreamers who fell in love with a stream. For one, it is also the revival of a family tradition reaching back to a founding father of America's environmental movement.

Most folks have never heard of the creek. Fewer have waded in it.

But at a time when talk of Puget Sound's problems often turns into abstractions like Superfund, stormwater runoff and toxic chemicals in parts-per-billion, this out-of-the-way place shows how the possibility for revival also hinges on more primal elements like mud, water and salmon. Passion and determination.

When Peter Bahls comes to a valley, one of the first things he does is walk the streams.

Like a cardiologist tracking a patient's blood vessels, the lanky 47-year-old looks for signs of sickness: Undersized culverts that block the way for spawning salmon, ditches that drain water from marshes, and creeks forced into straight lines that send water rushing too fast for baby fish.

He sees with the eyes of a fisheries biologist. But before college, he'd already gotten an education in rivers. As a boy in Portland, Bahls fell in love with them while steelhead fishing with his grandfather. This past September, on his annual steelhead fishing trip, he used his grandfather's 50-year-old fiberglass rod.

"I try to save fish most of the year," he explains. "And kill 'em a few weeks of the year."

In 1992, when Bahls first set foot in the Tarboo Valley as a biologist working for the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, it had been transformed by waves of settlement. The valley bottom, which once bristled with massive Sitka spruce and western red cedars, was a chain of pastures. An occasional stump, big as a kitchen table, offered a clue to what was once there.

Tarboo Creek, the valley's main artery, met a fate familiar to nearly every river around Puget Sound. It was dammed to make ponds for lumber mills and rerouted to clear pasture for dairy farms. Ditches were dug to drain marshes for farmland.

But the valley has been spared some of the worst damage. Far from any business center, much of the shoreline is untouched by concrete sea walls. Forests, regrown since the ravages of early logging, blanket the hillsides. The acres of pavement that come with subdivisions and shopping malls haven't reached here yet. Tarboo and Dabob bays — which are fed by Tarboo Creek and flow into each other — are so clean they host shellfish nurseries supplying many companies around Puget Sound.

So in 2001, when Bahls got fed up with a job at an environmental consulting firm, hopping from project to project, his thoughts returned to Tarboo Valley.

He was looking for a place to try a more grand plan. Not just a single Band-Aid but a methodical restoration of a whole stream system from the headwaters to the saltwater.

"I was hoping it would work out in Tarboo because I thought it was a perfect place," he says. "I sort of fell in love with this little watershed."

At first, Bahls doesn't seem like a salesman.

Instead of loud and gregarious, he is calm, speaking in abbreviated sentences, his eyes separated from the world by simple, silver-rimmed glasses. His grin, when he shows it, is boyish, almost shy. Jeans and worn hiking boots are his uniform.

But there's a quiet intensity that never lets up. Bahls can spend all day driving from one spot to another in the valley, without any sign of fatigue or evidence that he's given the same tour countless times.

Bit by bit, he has turned his solitary vision into a movement. Today, groups working in the valley include the Jefferson Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the state departments of Fish and Wildlife and Natural Resources, local schools and a handful of landowners.

"Whether you like Peter or you don't like Peter, he can talk you into doing things even *you* don't want to do," says Gene Jones, an elder with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe.

When Bahls worked for the tribe in the 1990s, he asked Jones to give a blessing at a celebration of a restoration project on Tarboo Creek. Jones turned him down at first, feeling that Bahls was too casual about the blessing. But Bahls persuaded him.

Today, Jones sits on the board of the Northwest Watershed Institute, the nonprofit Bahls created for his Tarboo Valley work.

"He's just a dynamo. He's like the Energizer bunny," Jones says. "He just keeps going and going and going."

Over the past seven years, Bahls and his supporters have bought or gotten permanent protections for more than 450 acres of land, most of it along Tarboo Creek. They have rerouted and restored a mile and a half of the main 5-mile creek and planted more than 60,000 trees. The total bill: \$4 million and counting.

Much of the money comes from government grants to revive flagging salmon runs and protect wetlands and bays. Some comes from environmental groups and donations from landowners.

Now they are awaiting a critical decision by the state Department of Natural Resources that would set the stage for protecting more than 3,500 acres of forest and shorelines. The proposed designation of much of the watershed as a natural area would enable the department to buy land from private landowners who want to sell. The state could also swap state-owned land there that's logged to raise money for schools with land elsewhere, effectively putting the state land inside the natural area off-limits to chainsaws.

But all this work didn't happen at once.

Bahls started small. He and his group removed a culvert in the stream that was too steep for spawning coho. The culvert lay under the driveway leading to the home of the Olympic Music Festival. Bahls' group replaced it with a picturesque wooden bridge.

"We've built a lot of bridges with landowners, literally," he says.

In a place this small, ticking off the neighbors can be fatal to environmental projects. He gradually worked his way into the fabric of the community, winning the trust of people who eventually sold him land, allowed trees to get planted along their streams or granted easements that sheltered land from development.

Bahls met with old-timers to learn about the valley's history. When some landowners worried a wetland restoration would flood their road, he promised to build them a new bridge. An annual tree-planting event draws 200 local schoolchildren and parents who use it as a fundraiser and hands-on science project.

"He's trying to make a connection for people with the place," says George Pess, a friend of Bahls and fellow biologist. "When you combine that with some substantive work, then all of a sudden you start seeing a place change over time."

Ecological restoration might sound romantic. But living it day-to-day isn't. Imagine weeding and landscaping a neglected yard covering hundreds of acres.

Susan Freeman and her family knew that better than most. But even she wasn't quite prepared when she saw their 17-acre share of the work.

Bahls, ever the salesman, had driven them around the valley first. He showed them a rebuilt stretch of the creek. They stood on the massive root of an old-growth spruce tree, bridging a tributary where salmon spawn. He spoke of a vision where trees like that would rise up and down the valley.

Then, he took them to the land he wanted them to buy.

Walls of blackberry brambles made it hard even to see the ditch-like remains of the creek. The previous owner logged most of the big trees before putting the land up for sale. Someone with a penchant for digging had bulldozed big piles of dirt and excavated two fake ponds.

Something about it, though, recalled the place that Freeman's grandfather turned into a birthplace of the modern environmental movement. And at least this property didn't have a shack 3 feet deep in chicken manure. In 1935, Aldo Leopold, a scientist and Freeman's grandfather, bought a worn-out 120-acre farm, complete with cabin-turned-chicken-coop, in central Wisconsin. It became his laboratory, retreat and muse.

He and his family restored the shack and experimented with reviving the woods and prairie that once thrived there. The experience became Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac," a book revered by American environmentalists for its elegant prose and stirring call to restore what's been lost. People now visit the shack as if on a pilgrimage.

The place also became a central part of the Leopold family. Susan Freeman's father and aunts and uncles reveled in memories of their work there. The family started the Aldo Leopold Foundation and helped get the shack nominated as a National Historic Landmark.

Susan Freeman met her husband there in 1980. Scott Freeman was a young biologist staying nearby while working on habitat restoration. She was a recent art-school graduate on a summer fellowship. They married a year later.

The couple, who moved to Seattle in 1985, had talked for years of trying to find their own piece of land to repair. In 2003 they sent e-mails to local environmental groups asking if they had a piece of affordable land in need of restoration.

A few weeks later, they got their first phone call from Bahls. Someone was selling land crossed by 1,000 feet of Tarboo Creek, and he was trying to find a buyer with a conservationist bent.

He'd found them.

Today, the blackberries have been hacked back. The stream meanders down a new route dug by an excavator. The Freemans turned the logged trees into a 192-square-foot cabin, the descendant of the original Leopold shack.

They have planted 4,000 trees on their land: cedar, alder, Douglas fir, vine maple, Sitka spruce and white pine. As Susan walks through a meadow near the creek, she gives each sapling a proprietary touch while saying matter-of-factly, "We come out here and we spend the whole time working."

Bahls spends a lot of his time overseeing work crews planting trees, digging new stream channels or wielding mowers and pickaxes to keep weeds from choking out newly planted trees.

One day, he drives up a dirt road to a spot stripped of vegetation, except for scattered mounds of blackberry vines. Three men, caked in dirt, two bare to the waist, gouge away at the remaining thicket.

"This," declares Bahls, "is the worst job."

His foreman, Karl Peterson, who goes by Toad, has endured hacking blackberries in smothering heat and planting saplings in driving sleet. Last winter, he chopped through ice to plant young trees.

Back on the Freeman land, one of Scott's main assignments is keeping the blackberries at bay.

"Some people get it. That it's not gorgeous, and it's not a view, and we're not sitting out here living the good life, sipping martinis on the back porch," he says.

"Sometimes you think, 'I can't wait until this tree is big.' Which you can't. But on the other hand, just enjoying every year to year you feel . . ."

"Connected," Susan chimes in.

"Yeah," Scott says. "It's such a wonderful thing."

Not everyone is so enchanted with Bahls' vision.

The biggest source of contention is logs — ones that have been put up, and ones that some people want to cut down.

Bahls' group, shellfishing companies and several local residents recently sued to block a logging project on a state-owned hillside above Tarboo Bay.

They want the state to wait until after the decision about protections for state land. A Jefferson County judge ruled in their favor, telling the state it hadn't done enough to consider the risk of water pollution from logging.

Then there are the hundreds of logs Bahls has planted in the middle of the valley. Weathered to silver, some more than 40 feet tall, they poke from pastures like abandoned totem poles.

Bahls calls it “Woodhenge.” He had workers put them there as a place for fish-eating birds to perch and bug-eating birds to peck.

His thinking: If you’re trying to restore a forest, the last important piece of habitat you’ll get is big dead trees. So he decided to speed things up.

But it hasn’t proven popular with some locals, says Ray McDonald, a heavy-equipment operator who lives nearby and sold 72 acres of his land to Bahls’ group.

“You ought to see the calls I’ve gotten from people. ‘What’s going on?’ Just complaining,” McDonald says. “It really isn’t attractive. And it doesn’t do a damn bit of good.”

The debate about the trees underscores something deeper. Everyone involved has an aesthetic sense of what the landscape *ought* to look like.

Take Jim Yeakel, who moved from Bainbridge Island to get away from the crowds. His land abuts property owned by Bahls’ institute. He agreed to put a conservation easement on 20 acres of his land along a fork of Tarboo Creek. But he’s refused to give Bahls a conservation easement on more land or let them plant more trees. He doesn’t want to live in the middle of a forest.

“Basically we bought this place because we like it the way it is,” Yeakel says. “And so long as we own it that’s the way it’s going to stay.”

Dan Yarr is more accepting of the changes to a valley he first lived in as a newborn, 91 years ago. His family started working the land in 1891. With his massive hands and the strength that made him a University of Washington lineman, he helped dig a new channel for part of the creek 60 years ago.

Now, he’s watching as Bahls undoes all that work. Bahls’ institute bought Yarr’s 200 acres, turning it into a centerpiece of the project. Besides trying to convert the pasture back into a forest, Bahls dreams of building an environmental education center and cabins where researchers can stay.

Yarr drives down from his home near Port Hadlock occasionally to see the work. He speaks of it with the circumspection of someone who has seen almost a century of change.

“The land is still there,” he tells critics. “It’s not been covered with blacktop. If the country ever needs it to produce food, the land’s there.”

Environmental restoration projects do have a checkered history.

Government workers planted reed canary grass along Tarboo Creek. Now it’s despised as an invasive weed that chokes out native plants.

McDonald, the heavy-equipment operator, remembers jobs where he plucked fallen trees from streams. Biologists thought it would help salmon by clearing obstacles. Today, scientists say logs are critical to a healthy stream. McDonald is getting paid to put the logs back in.

“Hopefully we’re getting better at this restoration as time goes on, because there’s a lot of weird stuff,” Bahls says of past work.

Visit one of the places where he has reworked a creek, and what’s most striking is how natural it looks.

The stream flows beneath tangles of logs and settles into shaded pools where tiny coho swim. It’s hard to realize that, for now, it’s as artificial as the ditch cutting through hay fields.

Bahls tells stories of coho spawning in streams they couldn’t reach before. One neighbor reported seeing trumpeter swans feeding in a revived marsh for the first time in 40 years. Eagles perch in the maligned dead trees, watching for salmon.

But for now, success here is measured more in anecdotes than hard data. The kind of change envisioned here can take decades, as trees grow and generations of fish return.

When Bahls wants a reminder of his vision for the valley’s future, he straps on his waders.

The final half mile of Tarboo Creek, before it reaches the tideflats of Tarboo Bay, hasn’t been logged for 80 years or more. The state bought 158 acres there from the Pope Resources timber company in 1998, and has basically ignored it ever since.

Once a week, for much of the year, Bahls wades up the stream, counting salmon and steelhead.

On a recent day, he goes to see if coho or chinook have arrived to spawn. On the bank, near the creek’s mouth, the shiny skin of a coho lies crumpled in the dirt, the meat picked clean by a raccoon or otter.

Bahls clammers onto a fallen log and looks into a deep, brown pool where the creek slows.

“This is where the fish come in early,” he says. “They’ll just sit here.” He knows every bend, every logjam, every sandbar.

The air is moist and cool. A canopy of cedars, spruce and Douglas firs turns the midday light to dusk. Orange maple leaves stand out like tiny lanterns. Few blackberries remain entrenched here, and no reed canary grass — it doesn’t thrive in the shade.

Quiet except for the gurgle of the creek, it feels like a different world from the open pastures upstream. Bahls is thinking decades ahead when, if everything goes as planned, the forests return to all of Tarboo Creek.

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