

“Willamette River Quality.” Oregon Field Guide Video #812. Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 1998. (Reviewed by Alletta Brenner)

The main focus of this film is the modern day problem of non-point source pollution in the Willamette River and the ways in which scientists are now working to identify and stem these kinds of contamination. In this discussion, a great deal of emphasis is made on how the pressures of growth affect our water quality. One of the central tenets of the film is the historical context of this problem.

The film begins with a decent, though short, history of the river's pollution and efforts to clean it up. Starting with the effort to pass environmental protections in the late 1930's, the film gives a brief outline of the environmental problems the river then faced, and the various campaigns to ameliorate it. In particular, the film focuses on the period from the 1960s to 1972, when the river was declared restored, garnering national attention and giving Oregon a reputation for environmentalism.

Within this historical context, the film makes a point of emphasizing how the problems that the river faces today are not new, but rather things that existed all along and were never fixed. While the most obvious problems, the pollution coming from factories and municipalities, were dealt with, those more intangible ones, brought on by the pressures of human presence, have continued and now, spurred by a population boom, grown to sizeable proportions. Now as scientists are coming to understand the precise ways in which our everyday activities affect the river, they are also finding relatively simple and effective ways to curb them. The only difference is that this time around, the answer to saving our river lies not so much in collective political action, but in individual conscientiousness and responsibility.

Critique

While this film focuses primarily on present day issues of pollution and restoration, it does a good job in contextualizing these problems within a historical worldview. This history is very important, because as the film notes, the solution to today's problems lies very much within the realm of individual perception. Because of the proclaimed success of the 1970s, many Oregonians may not see the river as in danger, and as a result fail to see the importance of the environmental impact of their actions. By addressing this history, the film places the river into the matrix of other recent problems concerning growth and development, helping to better explain and situate the problem in such a way that the general population can identify with. By highlighting the terrible historical state of the river, and the massive effort it took to clean it up, we are reminded of the precedent for taking action, and with it the possibility for action today. Further, we are reminded of how bad it can get, emphasizing the point of how we cannot afford to let our past efforts be lost.

This film is an excellent source for anyone who does not know a great deal about the pollution of the Willamette River either historically, or in the present day. With simple and concrete narration and explanation, it does an excellent job of explaining the way in which we, as individuals, can and do affect environmental quality. While it does not go into particular detail on the science of river pollution, it does

provide in layman's terms, a number of precise examples of how and why pollution occurs and what can be done to remedy it. In all, I think the film is an excellent introductory tool.

[return to info sources page](#)

[return to home page](#)