

Ashland Conservation Commission to Sponsor the "Earth Bowl" and my quest for Environmental Literacy  
Conservation Corner – February 2015

In my days at college in Philadelphia, B.C., before cable, many of us in our fraternity would gather around our black and white T.V. Sunday nights to watch eight really smart students represent their university competing in the G.E. (General Electric) College Bowl. The format was pretty simple; two four person teams would answer questions as quickly as possible while the moderator was reading the question. Usually a team had the answer well before the moderator ever completed the question. If the team first answering the question got it wrong, the opposing team got to hear the complete question and then give the answer. Personally, I was able to get the answer right about twenty percent of the time except when the questions were sports related and then my percentage spiked to ninety percent. Points were tallied for each correct answer and the winning team collected about \$20,000 for their school...a tidy sum.

Fast forward many decades and land here in Ashland. In recognition of Earth Day in April our Commission had decided to resurrect the College Bowl format and have eight middle school teams compete in Ashland's first "Earth Bowl". Students will answer questions focused on our environment, everything from greenhouse gases to the Clean Air Act, from the writings of John Muir to protecting our native Salmon population.

Stay tuned for our announcement of an official date and place. We are shooting for an early evening event during Earth Week in April. Let's get behind this Ashland!

Now on to my personal quest for Environmental literacy. When I attended middle school in the late fifties, the term environmentalist was not part of the popular vernacular. Sometimes we heard the term conservationist...usually attached to Teddy Roosevelt. Rachel Carson would publish her book, "Silent Spring" in 1962 and catapult the environmental issue of hazardous pesticides into the realm of serious public debate. But even as a high school student Ms. Carson was unknown to me. While the hazards of chemical dumping and the pollution of our waters, land and air were certainly present in the sixties, they were not part of my high school curriculum. It would be a long time before we started to take the study of our environment as a serious subject in all but a few teaching institutions.

Fortunately, those days are behind us, most children today are taught in the early grades of the importance of maintaining a healthy planet for future generations. (Still, there is a lot more they need to master to really contribute to the necessary stewardship our planet requires. For example, how did we succeed in fixing the hole in the upper ozone layer and how can that help us with climate change? Or how did air pollution get reduced dramatically with cap and trade? This challenge is not just for kids. Like many adults I have been left behind so to speak.) Sure I read, sure I watch the science shows on TV and sure I do my web searches. But often ESPN is my first choice for TV viewing and internet browsing.

As my role in the Earth Bowl, I have been tasked with creating the questions focused on the history of the environmental movement, significant events, people and places. What an adventure this has been. Rachel Carson was only a name to me associated with her book and the banning of DDT. But doing my research for a question about her I discovered what an amazing woman she was, accomplishing things as a scientist in male dominated profession. We hear about how science does not attract girls from a young age (This is fortunately beginning to change). Instead of lionizing Betsy Ross for sewing the first American Flag, what if we asked our young students to learn about Rachel Carson? Talk about a female scientist as a role model for young girls! And while we are on the subject of influential females in the environmental movement? How interesting would it be for our students to learn about Jane Goodall or Erin Brockavitch?

I barely scratched the surface on the subject of female environmentalists but decided to move on and circle back later. Next I moved to the usual environmental icons, John Muir, George Grinnell, and Teddy Roosevelt. I was learning things about these men that I never knew before. And how wonderful is it that Ashland actually has a John Muir Middle School! And how about our previous Governor Tom McCall. As a TV documentarian, he awakened our state to take action and address our pollution problems in our rivers and air. My work is not done. I have lots more questions to write. I will be disappointed when I complete my task.

Hopefully many Ashland middle school students also take on the challenge of environmental literacy and choose to make a difference. Our planet's fate may depend on it.