

## ***A Simple Question – The Story of STRAW Synopsis***

**A Simple Question** is the story of the STRAW project — Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed. This 30-minute film recounts how an inspired teacher and her fourth grade class took up the challenge of saving the endangered California freshwater shrimp living in streams on private land. With no practical knowledge of environmental restoration, Laurette Rogers and her fourth grade class undertook its rescue by restoring creek side habitat on the property of local ranchers. Sixteen years later, the original class project is now a beloved, award-winning regional program that has involved thousands of kids, classroom teachers, numerous landowners, scientists, and government agencies in a community-based effort that to date has restored almost 20 miles of streamside habitat.

The film traces the experiences of several of the creators of STRAW, including Laurette Rogers, the teacher of that original fourth grade class who transformed her students' dismay into a unique learning and service experience. Paul Martin, without whose risk-taking and encouragement the project would never have happened; he later championed the program to neighboring ranchers who were key to expanding restoration opportunities throughout the watershed. Two of the original 4<sup>th</sup> grade class members appear as adults, offering their perspectives as they look back on the impact they had on the land, and on the impact the project has had on them. We also meet teachers for whom the STRAW project has transformed both their classroom and their teaching. Biologists, restorationists, agency personnel, as well as school children, all provide comments and anecdotes about this remarkable program that knits together community, kids, and the environment. Celebrated author, Richard Louv (“Last Child in the Wilderness”) and internationally recognized authority on empowering children, Dr. Roger Hart, offer insights into the importance of rekindling and “re-kindering” our relationship with nature.

In the film, Laurette recounts how the kids divided into teams to learn all that they could, from the natural history of this creature to the agencies responsible for their welfare and the laws affecting them. They conducted research, interviewed experts, created databases, held bake sales, designed t-shirts, called legislators, spoke with news people. In short, the effort to save the Ca freshwater shrimp became the class theme that inspired their learning for an entire year. All that was left to do was the actual saving of a species.

Paul Martin received an unsolicited call from Laurette, whom he likens to an unstoppable force. He still isn't sure why he agreed to allow a classroom of school children and their teacher to step on to his property to plant willows, clear obstructions, and shore up the banks of Stemple Creek. He remembers with great affection that none of them had a clue as to what they were doing, but they all had a lot of fun that day. It was the first of a swarm of such restoration excursions.

What began on Paul Martin's ranch that day has morphed into a project-based science and environmental education curriculum. The program is truly transformative. It transforms teachers burdened with meeting guidelines, standards and requirements who are looking for meaning, relevance, connection, and joy in their work with students. It transforms

students, ordinarily confined by the four walls of their classroom, through undertaking real work with real effects on the world around them and that they care about. It transforms landowning agriculturalists as they work with schools and government agencies to improve their land and its natural functions, re-connecting them to their community. It transforms environmental groups, government agencies, and professional restorationists, who are typically isolated in their separate silos of activity, through collaboration, cooperation and cross-pollination in support of something more embracing than their separate and limited agendas. And, of course, it has transformed the environment.

Those first shoots planted on Paul Martin's property are now a riparian forest some twenty-five to thirty feet high. They shade a meandering stream that remains within its banks, creating ideal habitat for the shrimp that are beginning to repopulate its length. Aside from the shrimp, the restoration of Stemple's vegetation has lured twenty-eight species of native birds to nest in its canopy. Researchers had originally counted only five before the children's work. Eighteen of those bird species are considered rare and endangered.

Maybe equally remarkable, the short stretch of Stemple Creek that has been repaired and made whole now extends beyond boundary and fence line throughout Marin and Sonoma Counties. Ranchers eagerly await "Restoration Season," from November through February, when STRAW brings cadres of kids, teachers, and parents out to weave the web of re-vegetated creeks across the landscape and to ignite a sense of real community.

**A Simple Question** is the latest story of the How On Earth project, a series of video programs and outreach campaigns designed for classroom use, broadcast and digital distribution that explore the challenges and contributions of environmental restoration across the United States. The programs feature compelling stories of dedicated individuals combining innovative science, new partnerships, and hard work to help nature heal itself. In turn, *How On Earth* contributes to a clearer vision of an environmentally-restored earth, and gives the public a much needed vehicle for inquiry and involvement in this burgeoning movement of positive action.

How On Earth is a being produced by Filmmakers Collaborative SF. David Donnenfield and Kevin White are the producers. For more information, contact:

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Links:

Trailer & How On Earth web site <http://www.how-on-earth.org>  
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