



Where Are We?

Current Health Status & Future Goals

Riparian areas change naturally over time. What we do in them and in the watersheds that surround them can speed up many of those changes. Sometimes the speed and degree of change is greater than the natural resiliency and healing rate of riparian areas. Development can cause streams to erode their banks faster, flows may fluctuate more and downcutting can dry up productive riparian areas. These changes are compounded in lakes and wetlands with accumulations of sediments and nutrients, water level fluctuations and a speeding up of the ageing process. If we acknowledge that riparian areas change and that we are responsible for some of these changes, it is a step towards setting goals for tomorrow's riparian areas. Sometimes looking back gives us a vision of where we need to go. Goal setting begins by asking three questions:

Where were we?

Where are we today?

Where do we want to be?

Riparian health is described in the following categories:

	HEALTHY; all riparian functions are being performed
	HEALTHY, WITH PROBLEMS; many functions are being performed but signs of stress are apparent
	UNHEALTHY; most functions are severely impaired or have been lost

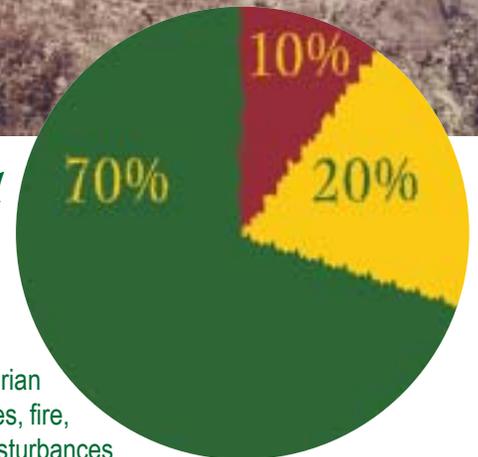


Where We Were

There is no simple answer to the question "how healthy were riparian areas in the past?". What is available to help us includes the written accounts of the observations by explorers, surveyors, fur traders, naturalists and the Northwest Mounted Police. Some early artwork exists and early photographs of the last part of the 1800s provide another visual window. We know from historical accounts that there were disturbances like buffalo grazing, fire, drought and floods affecting riparian health. From those same records we understand that beaver populations were much higher historically than now. The effect of beavers on riparian health was probably positive, especially through the maintenance of higher water tables that would have enhanced the amount of woody vegetation. By looking at riparian sites today we can also gain insight into vegetation potential - what could have existed on the site.



Past - 1801



Based on all of these bits of evidence we can speculate that prior to settlement riparian areas were mostly healthy. Natural events such as floods, grazing from native ungulates, fire, drought, beavers and landslides did affect riparian condition and the results of these disturbances meant health could vary over time and from reach to reach. Because of the natural resiliency of these systems and the long return intervals between use or disturbance, it is likely that ecological function was restored relatively quickly.