Seattle

The Shoreline We Made

Seattle, at the water's edge

Start with a question that sounds simple: where does the land end?

Along the lower Duwamish, an answer depends on more than the outline of the water today. The river was dredged and straightened for industry, and some of the material taken from its channel became land.

This field book looks at that reshaping through three kinds of evidence: documented history, a current map, and your own observations. It also asks who has lived with the changes and what a shoreline can become next.

First-edition reading proof / 48 interior pages

Sources 1 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

Read an edge, then look again

Use the locator to choose a stretch of river or waterway. Trace its shape in your notes without trying to make a perfect map. Add the things that interest you: an inlet, a crossing, a hard corner, a broad bank.

The map can help you locate a question. The historical accounts can help you ask when and why a place changed. Your observations belong alongside those records, with a date and a clear note about where you were.

An outline alone cannot tell the whole history of an edge. Give yourself space for two readings of the same place: what it does today, and what you would like to know about its earlier uses.

01 Place and date

02 What I can see

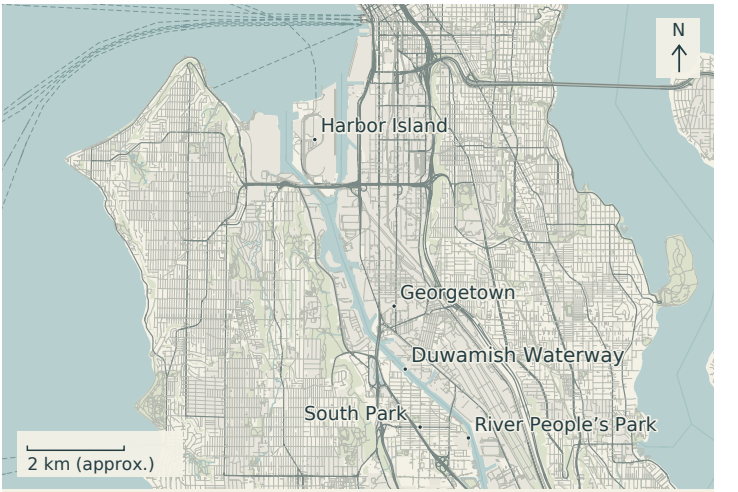
03 What the source says

04 What I still want to know

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A CLOSER LOOK

A river through the city



Present-day lower Duwamish locator. River People’s Park labels Duwamish River People’s Park. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors.

The present-day locator places Harbor Island, the lower Duwamish and South Park in the same frame. Use it to follow the water through the working landscape.

Choose a bend or branch and note how you recognized it. This map shows current geographic data; it does not supply the position of an earlier river channel.

Sources 9 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

A place with a living history

The Duwamish Tribe describes a relationship with the Seattle area reaching back beyond recorded history and continuing in the present. Its own history also locates today's longhouse near a former village.

That account changes the starting point for this book. A river does not begin when engineers give it a channel or a mapmaker gives it a line. Its history includes people, homes, food, work and displacement.

Read the Tribe's account alongside public-agency records. Notice who is speaking in each source and which questions each one answers. Leave room in your notes for a perspective that the map cannot provide.

Sources 2 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

Making a working waterway

Washington's Department of Ecology describes the lower Duwamish being straightened and dredged for industrial development in the early twentieth century. Excavated material helped create Harbor Island and filled parts of the former channel.

Removing material from one place and placing it in another links the waterway to the land beside it. The history is not confined to a river line: it also belongs to the surfaces made from that work.

On the locator, choose one place where you would like to understand that relationship. Write a question before drawing an earlier outline. What dated survey, photograph or engineering record would you need to answer it?

Sources 1 · full references at the back of the essay

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A CLOSER LOOK

Three actions, different results



Original explanatory diagram. The shapes illustrate processes and are not surveyed Duwamish shorelines.

Dredging removes material from a bed or channel. Filling puts material into a low or wet area. Straightening changes the course a channel follows.

The lower Duwamish history includes all three. This diagram separates the actions; it does not draw the historical river.

Which action describes material leaving a place, and which describes it arriving?

Sources 1 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

Changing uses, continuing work

Early 1900s

The lower Duwamish is straightened and dredged for industrial development.

Summer 2022

Duwamish River People's Park opens at the former Terminal 117 site in South Park.

Late 2024

Sediment cleanup begins in the waterway's upper reach, according to Ecology.

These dates mark selected events in this book's sources. They are points in a longer story, rather than a complete history of the river.

The last two entries concern different work: creating shoreline habitat and access at one site, and removing contaminated sediments from a reach of the waterway.

Sources 1, 7, 5 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

An estuary is a meeting place

In a coastal estuary, freshwater and seawater meet. The lower Duwamish remains part of that meeting even where industry has changed its banks.

NOAA's restoration account explains why habitat matters alongside cleanup: young salmon use this part of the river during their transition toward saltwater. Restoring marsh, mudflat and shoreline vegetation addresses needs that removing contamination alone cannot satisfy.

Try looking at an edge as more than a boundary. Where might water spread, where might plants grow, and where does the edge rise abruptly? Keep those as observations and questions. A short visit cannot establish habitat quality or the condition of the water.

Sources 3, 6 · full references at the back of the essay

FIELD NOTES

Watch the waterline

Tides change the level of the sea. To make a useful observation of a shoreline, record the time as well as the date.

From a public viewpoint, choose one fixed feature you can recognize again. Sketch where the visible waterline meets it. Add a note about weather and anything affecting your view.

If you return at another time, make a second sketch from the same place. Compare what you actually recorded before explaining the difference. Was your viewpoint the same? Can you distinguish a change in water level from a change in the bank?

You can also do this exercise with dated photographs whose locations you can establish.

01 Fixed feature

02 Date and time

03 Visible waterline

04 What stayed the same?

Sources 4 · full references at the back of the essay

FIELD NOTES

Read a restored place

Duwamish River People's Park opened in South Park in summer 2022, on the former Terminal 117 site. The Port describes habitat restoration and public shoreline access as parts of the project.

Use the project's published account, or a visit to its public areas, to make two lists. In the first, record the functions the project was intended to provide. In the second, record what you can actually observe.

Choose one item that would require repeated observations or monitoring to assess. Describe the evidence you would want before calling it a success. This gives your notes a useful distinction: design intention, visible result and unanswered question.

01 Intended function

02 What I observed

03 Evidence still needed

Sources 7 · full references at the back of the essay

A CLOSER LOOK

A shoreline worth asking about

Choose one place from the locator and write a short research brief for yourself. Describe the question in one sentence: an earlier bank, a filled channel, a former land use, a restoration project.

List the source that brought the question to your attention. Then identify a different kind of evidence that might test it. A map, a photograph, a firsthand account and an engineering report can each contribute something.

Leave your answer unfinished if it needs to be. The useful result of this book may be a more precise question about a familiar place—and a record of how you began to answer it.

01 My place

02 My question

03 The source I started with

04 Another source I would seek

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Sources & place notes

1. Lower Duwamish Waterway: site history
Washington Department of Ecology

2. History of the Duwamish People
Duwamish Tribe

3. What is an estuary?
NOAA National Ocean Service

4. What are tides?
NOAA National Ocean Service

5. Lower Duwamish Waterway cleanup
Washington Department of Ecology

6. Lower Duwamish River restoration
NOAA Damage Assessment, Remediation, and Restoration Program

7. Duwamish River People's Park
Port of Seattle

8. Seattle quadrangle, edition October 1897, reprint August 1901
US Geological Survey

9. Copyright and license
OpenStreetMap

https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright

Full references, source records and image credits:

originbooks.com/places/seattle/shoreline

YOUR OBSERVATIONS