

Voices

SUNDAY

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FEBRUARY 26, 2006

ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

SAVING the STEELHEAD



NEWS-PRESS FILE PHOTOS

Opportunities for recovery in creeks of Santa Barbara

Imagine strolling along Mission Creek in Santa Barbara during a lunch break on a spring day and seeing hundreds of steelhead trout — each about 2 feet long — shimmering with silvery rainbow colors in the afternoon sun.



Brian Trautwein

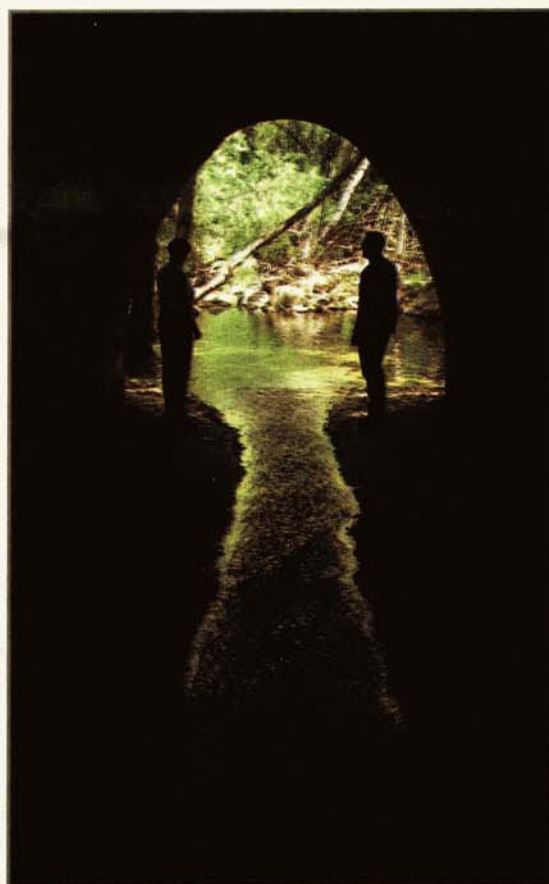
The author is an environmental analyst with the Environmental Defense Center and is on the county's list of qualified biologists.

Picture these remarkable fish, swimming swiftly from the ocean into the creek at East Beach, and darting between boulders in the stream as they migrate to ancient spawning grounds in gurgling pools and riffles by the Mission, Rocky Nook Park and the Botanic Garden.

A fantasy? No. This is exactly what people enjoyed decades ago. And it is exactly what Santa Barbarans will enjoy in the coming years once we fix our neglected creeks.

ON AM 1290

Hear Brian Trautwein discuss the physical and political barriers to the return of steelhead trout to our creeks from 10 to 11 a.m. today on AM 1290.



Please see **TRAUTWEIN** on G4

Opinion: Saving the Steelhead

NEWS-PRESS FILE PHOTOS

February 26, 2006 8:04 AM

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MOST ENDANGERED

The Southern California Steelhead is one of the most endangered species in this region. Once numbering in the tens of thousands, local steelhead runs have diminished by an astonishing 99 percent and are literally on the verge of extinction.

However, with a little help, their population can be recovered. Steelhead habitat rehabilitation in our creeks and rivers will require a focused effort by local residents.

Dams, concrete flood control channels and culverts are the primary reasons the steelhead is in danger of extinction, and has been listed since 1997 as a federally Endangered Species. Hundreds of these man-made structures block the migration paths steelhead used for millions of years. Sadly, steelhead cannot even swim a few miles upstream to reach the spawning grounds in the foothill streams of Santa Barbara.

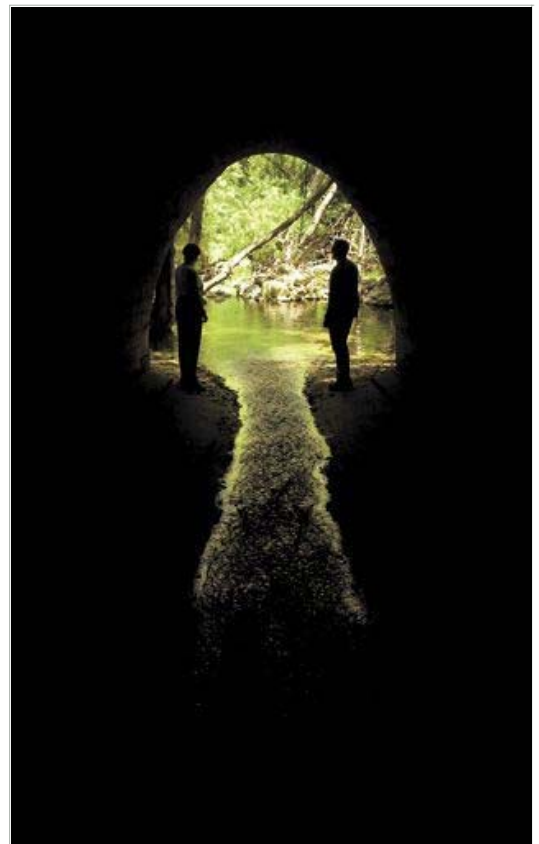
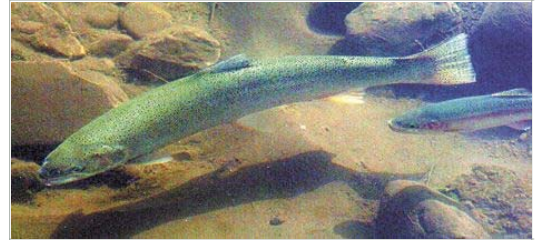
BACK FROM THE BRINK

The good news is now that we understand the problem we can fix it before it is too late for the remaining steelhead.

Local environmental groups, including the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) and Community Environmental Council, are diligently working with Santa Barbara city and county officials, and with state and federal agencies, to restore fish passage to steelhead spawning grounds in Santa Barbara's creeks. This will enable steelhead to repopulate creeks they were once numerous in.

The most ambitious steelhead restoration project in Santa Barbara was conceived by the EDC. It aims to restore a mile-long section of concrete-channelized Mission Creek between Canon Perdido and Valerio streets in downtown Santa Barbara.

This channel was constructed in the 1960s and ever since has blocked steelhead migration to spawning grounds upstream. It increases the velocity of the flowing water, preventing migration, and its smooth concrete bed lacks the pools fish need to rest in as they migrate upstream.



An engineer hired by the EDC with grants from the Wendy P. McCaw Foundation prepared a preliminary design to make this section of creek fish-friendly. After additional modeling is completed and funds are secured, this project will be constructed, enabling steelhead to once again access their spawning grounds in Mission Creek.

People from all walks of life will be able to go to Oak Park and Rocky Nook Park to watch these incredible and beautiful fish swim upstream to complete their life cycles.

Similar success stories are occurring in many cities and counties along the West Coast. Just miles east of Santa Barbara County, the largest dam removal project in the U.S. is being planned. It will remove the 198-foot tall, silt-filled Matilija Dam to allow steelhead to swim over 30 miles up the Ventura River to their historic spawning grounds.

Studies are also under way to remove the 100-foot-tall Rindge Dam on Malibu Creek to rebuild that stream's once-significant steelhead population.

Once these recovery efforts are successful, the Southern California Steelhead will be a visual symbol of Santa Barbara's healthy watersheds and creeks. Steelhead could be the icon of the successful efforts of the local nonprofit environmental groups, the County Flood Control District, the County Water Agency, and the local cities to restore and manage healthy creeks.

It will be, literally, a "watershed moment" illustrating to people far and near that we can live in harmony with the natural world while enjoying all the benefits of modern civilization.

POLITICAL THREATS

Steelhead face another more insidious threat than dams and culverts. The current federal administration -- as part of a calculated and systematic effort to undermine endangered species protection -- continues to abandon science and logic. Its actions have lessened protection for steelhead and their habitats.

For instance, in December it denied federal protection to the portion of the steelhead population living above dams even though these fish share a common gene pool and are part of the same taxonomic species (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) as the fish below dams. By not protecting the entire population and gene pool, the species is more vulnerable to extinction.

It refused Endangered Species Act protection to the majority of -- and the best -- steelhead habitats (those in the headwater streams above dams). Without recognizing the importance of these habitats, it will be difficult to fulfill the community's vision of restoring sustainable steelhead runs to local creeks and rivers.

While dams and culverts form the major physical barriers to steelhead recovery, the current administration has proven to be a considerable political barrier to recovery. Just this month, the administration announced its proposed budget, which would slash funding for steelhead restoration projects.

LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES

While there may be some obstacles to steelhead protection and restoration in Santa Barbara County, there are many opportunities. Fortunately, there is strong community support for bringing the Southern California Steelhead back from the brink of extinction during this generation.

With help, steelhead can recover

F.Y.I.

Today, the Community Environmental Council is sponsoring Santa Barbara's first 5-kilometer Steelhead Run and the first-ever Santa Barbara Steelhead Festival. Learn more at www.sbsteelheadfest.org.

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