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Upstream battle to recover steelhead

Ed Henke puts his research up against special interests' fish stories

By Ed Henke
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Re: the Jan. 13 commentary in The Star, "United Water strives to balance needs of people and fish," by Roger Orr, president of the board of directors of the United Water Conservation District:

I would very much like to address some of the statements and issues raised.

First, some personal background information. I grew up in Ventura during the 1930s and '40s and, like many others of the time, both young and old, was immersed in the heritage, culture and traditions involving the great outdoors — just generally enjoying Mother Nature's most generous and prolific gifts, free natural-capital.

During my elementary school years, the first day of trout season was May 1, an official holiday for many. All you had to do was bring a note from home stating you were going

fishing, and you were excused for the day. It was the same for Santa Barbara County. As a direct result of these growing-up experiences, I developed deep-seated values, which have prevailed and evolved into a strong sense of responsibility for our natural resources. With this in mind, I will address various aspects of the contents of Orr's commentary.

Endangered for 50-plus years

To "proceed with reason and dialogue," as Orr stated, may be logical, but, in this case, it smacks of maintaining the status quo, which is neither a plan nor a solution. The southern steelhead was declared an endangered species in 1997. In my personal judgment, it had been fully endangered for more than 50 years.

The Federal Endangered Species Act was passed by Congress in 1972. Exclusive of UWCD's previous statement, it has boldly gone on record claiming that steelhead never "volitionally" entered the Piru Creek system, a major tributary to the Santa Clara River system. Such a statement defies logic. The southern steelhead of the Santa Clara River system were documented as early as 1872: "Ten-pound Trout Caught in Santa Paula Creek" (Ventura Signal, April 6, 1872).

So, when did the demise of the southern steelhead begin? Other guest-column contributors blame the UWCD for its demise. With UWCD's upriver Santa Felicia Dam on Piru Creek, and its Vern Freeman Diversion-Dam on the lower end near Saticoy on the main Santa Clara River, it is impossible to exclude these major water-diversion operations as major contributors to the current endangered species status of the southern steelhead of the Santa Clara River system.

UWCD stated that the entire West Coast is experiencing the same steelhead decline, as if some kind of natural phenomenon were taking place. But the southern steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss irideus*, Haplotypes V and VIII) of the Santa Clara River system is the only steelhead population on the entire West Coast with "endangered species" status. Others have "threatened" status. There are more than 1,000 dams in California more than 100 feet high, as well as multitudes of other diversions and unregulated groundwater extractions.

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One recorded major impact to the historical Santa Clara River system steelhead population began in the mid-1920s with the advent of the old, crude Butler Diversion-Dam, located just above Saticoy, a precursor to the current Vern Freeman Diversion-Dam. I have accumulated historical documentation through recorded oral-history sessions with old-timers that both juvenile steelhead and adults were being diverted out of the Santa Clara River into settling ponds to die and rot.

Charles Outland letter

The following is additional quoted documentation by respected and renowned Ventura County citizen and author Charles Outland:

"I had the best trout fishing anyone could ever ask for right in my own backyard in the Santa Clara River, and they were all native, ocean-run trout [steelhead].... [T]he Santa Clara River was the best stream of them all and nobody but myself knew it! It was nothing to drive within 100 yards of a good fishing hole and catch a limit 12-16 inches long in 45 minutes. [The limits were 25 in the 1920s and 1930s, and then 15.] These runs began in March (about a month earlier on the Ventura River) with the large so-called steelhead, which are nothing but an ocean-run rainbow. This was during the closed season then, and by the time the first [of May] came around, they were long gone up the Sespe, Santa Paula, and Piru Creeks [Henke emphasis]. However, behind the big steelhead would come a run of what old-timers called spawn chasers, 'a rainbow trout that had been to salt water [and now scientifically classified as a steelhead], but didn't wait until he was 20 inches or more long to return. This run of fish varied in size 7-16 inches.... The last month of the season [October] provided some great sport...."

He then reported the fish had added 2 or 3 inches and a third more weight.

"What happened? About 1946 the water district started diverting water at the Saticoy spreading grounds during the winter months. [Just what the Santa Felicia, Pyramid, Castaic, Bouquet Canyon, and Vern Freeman Dams-Diversions have been doing for years. â€ Henke] Always before they had waited until late April and the fish run [steelhead] had already passed [migration and immigration] that point. I never personally saw a native run trout after that time, although I have been told by residents along Santa Paula Creek that they had seen them in 1969 after the big flood...."

â€ From: **Charles F. Outland, Santa Paula, Nov. 18, 1971, letter to Mark Moore.**

In-depth research

UWCD states that there was no research of the history of steelhead prior to 1930. Actually, I started a historical research project on anadromous salmonids (steelhead and salmon) in Southern California waters (principally in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties) in January 1994. I have submitted to federal agencies a number of historical documentations, which then become public property available for review by the general public.

My historical research and documentation of the Santa Clara River system began with excerpts from Portola's expedition as he and others traversed down the Santa Clara River in July 1769. This trek began in the immediate vicinity of Piru Creek and traversed down the river to the sea and up the coast.

UWCD has hired an individual to do historical research. She made an obvious attempt to discredit research findings I had presented to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/National Marine Fisheries Service Southwest Region. Such attempts to discredit involved a photograph I submitted, along with a description of who was in it and when and where it was taken.

This photograph is of two men holding six large steelhead kelts (spawned-out steelhead) caught in Agua Blanca Creek, tributary to Piru Creek, circa 1915. It was provided to me, along with the applicable historical information, by Harry Lechler of Harry Lechler Museum, Piru, following a personal day's visit to his museum June 18, 1998.

This individual placed two calls to a government scientist, who advised her to talk to me. The government scientist gave me her phone numbers, and I called her. All of her calls focused on one issue: What is on the back of the 1915 photograph? She was not the least bit inquisitive about the results of my 14 years of historical research.

Evidence for historical presence

UWCD's representatives in the Jan. 13 Star commentary and elsewhere have aimed to discredit the historical presence of indigenous populations of steelhead in the Piru Creek system, claiming they never volitionally entered the system. Additionally, they stated the National Marine Fisheries Service is trying to recover unrealistic populations of Santa Clara River system steelhead. My research and methodology to estimate the historical population densities of southern steelhead of the Santa Clara River system (and elsewhere), suggest that many thousands of these fish historically volitionally entered the Santa Clara River system, which includes the Piru Creek system, a major tributary.

Adequate amounts of water key

My last point concerns UWCD's statement that scientists have difficulty in distinguishing steelhead and trout. First and foremost, both are rainbow trout, one being the anadromous form (steelhead) and the other being the resident form. Historical photographs I have acquired and presented show numerous

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rainbow trout from the Piru Creek system, ranging from 12-plus to 25-plus inches, all judged to be steelhead. California coastal rainbows that have access to the sea rarely get over 8 to 10 inches without having some ocean time.

â€" Explanation for Visual Determinations:

"The size of steelhead and stream resident coastal rainbow trout varies from population to population and is dependent on a variety of factors, including length of time spent at sea, in steelhead, and availability of food. In small streams [Agua Blanca/Piru Creek system] coastal rainbow trout, like all sub-species and races of rainbow trout, typically mature at 6-8 inches (15-20 cm.) in length."

â€" **From: Dr. Robert J. Behnke, "Trout and Salmon of North America." (New York: Free Press, A Division of Simon and Schuster. Copyright 2002 Chanticleer Press, Inc., p. 76.)**

â€" Scientific Methodology to Determine: Examination of otoliths of a rainbow trout. "[C]an identify whether a fish's female parent is a steelhead or a stream resident rainbow trout." (From: Behnke, p. 72.) Otoliths are bones in the trout's inner ear.

Once a rainbow trout enters the sea and then returns to its natal stream, irrespective of its size on return, 12-plus inches or 3 feet long, it is a steelhead. Charles Outland's experiences are classic examples.

Steelhead need adequate amounts of water at the right time to migrate and emigrate to/from the watershed extremities to procreate and perpetuate.

Today, the Santa Clara River channel is nearly 100 percent an essential conveyance system. To provide the right amounts of water at the right time, coinciding with Santa Clara River's bar/mouth open to the sea, is the No. 1 objective of this discussion. Santa Clara River system water is not wasted flowing to the sea, as special interests like to espouse, but good amounts will percolate into the subterranean water systems for storage, helping prevent salt-water intrusion.

â€" *Ed Henke, of Ashland, Ore., is a former Ventura County resident, who has done 14 years of historical research on this topic in Ventura County and Santa Barbara County for a book or books he plans to finish this year. The working title is "Rivers of Despair, Rivulets of Hope, Values â€" Public Policy â€" Public Trust." He graduated from Ventura High School in 1945 and Ventura College in 1947.*

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