

March 27, 2009, 4:17 pm

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Photo: Paul Wellman

Shallow Waters for Steelhead?

Expert Alleges Water Poaching in Montecito Creeks

Thursday, August 30, 2007

By [Martha Sadler](#)

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Natasha Lohmus is worried about the trout. Formerly a game warden and now an environmental scientist with California's Department of Fish and Game, Lohmus has reported three pumps in Montecito creeks because she

suspects they are drawing off more water than the endangered Southern California Steelhead can spare. Small and known as rainbow trout until after their pilgrimage to the ocean—at which point they become sparkly gray and enormous, and are then known as Steelhead—these shapeshifting fish are better adapted to drier, hotter conditions than most of their brethren. The Southern Californian variety is able to persist in small, isolated pools for years if necessary, Lohmus said.

Nevertheless, Southern California Steelhead have been in precarious circumstances ever since people started damming and otherwise obstructing the fish's rivers and streams with culverts, debris basins, and road crossings. Not counting the rainbow trout planted in Cachuma Lake and in other reservoirs upstream of the fish-impassible Bradbury Dam, the Steelhead population diminished to a mere 500 spawning adults, according to estimates given in 1997, the year they were listed as endangered. Though no more recent count is available, the Southern California Steelhead is still endangered. Biologists are concerned about, among other things, inbreeding. Drought conditions such as they are now make the fish's survival all the more tenuous—and those studying the fish have yet to predict how the Zaca Fire's aftermath will exacerbate the situation, as ash and soil flow into the creeks.

Lohmus, who has been keeping an eye on the fish for more than 20 years, has relocated stranded Steelhead to pools less likely to dry out. She has also braved banks of poison oak to follow pump lines laid in the creeks to the backs of estates, banging on doors to inquire whether the owners have a permit to pump from the creek. If the pumps don't have screens to prevent fish or frogs from being sucked up—a clear violation—she rips them out first and asks questions later.

Otherwise, it requires research to determine who owns the property, whether the owner has a permit, and if so, what conditions are attached to it. A number of Montecito properties and private water companies have historic rights to pump creek water, but they still need a permit from the Regional Water Quality Control Board and, especially for larger projects, an additional Streambed Alteration Agreement from Fish and Game. The latter has been demanded of smaller users more and more frequently to ensure they are allowing an “ecologically significant flow” to continue downstream.

Enforcement is unsystematic, however. Even Lohmus's sporadic patrols are not part of her job description, which is primarily to issue permits. Recently, she went to the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Long Beach division—which is responsible for implementing the Endangered Species Act in watersheds from Monterey to Mexico—and summoned a Steelhead biologist and an enforcement officer to walk with her along San Ysidro Creek and Montecito Creek. (Both areas are considered important habitat for the Southern California Steelhead.) As a result of that June 30 walk-through, three pumps are still under investigation by the NMFS enforcement arm.

The NMFS refused to disclose any details of the investigations, but it turns out one of the suspicious pumps belongs to La Casa de Maria, an interfaith retreat center whose director, Stephanie Glatt, said she has not heard from Fish and Game or from the NMFS and was alarmed to hear that La Casa's pump may be harming endangered trout. Glatt said she wasn't aware of the fish's presence in San Ysidro Creek, which flows past the grounds. La Casa has historic water rights, Glatt said, and resumed using creek water about 10 years ago to cultivate the property's orchards. The gardeners activate the pump at night when the creek's flow is highest—because the trees on the banks are not transpiring—to deep-water more than 300 citrus, avocado, and stone fruit trees about every two weeks during the dry season.

Part of the reason for cultivating the orchard was so La Casa could grow food organically and locally; the center also has plans to start a vegetable garden. The retreat center relies partially on the income from its fruit and marmalade, but as a nonprofit enterprise it does not qualify for an agricultural rate from the Montecito Water District, according to district director Bob Roebuck. If it has to buy its irrigation water, it will do so at an expensive domestic rate. “If it is endangering the trout, I can live without pumping when the creek is low,” said Glatt, somewhat glumly. (Such a change will mean more fundraising.) “La Casa has a strong commitment to the environment,” she said.

Thanks to lobbying by the likes of the Urban Creeks Council, the Sierra Club, and various homeowner groups, hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent or are slated to be spent on retrofitting culverts, debris basins, and bridges so that fish can swim past them to suitable ponds. Some individual Montecitans are also trying to help: William Dalziel maintains what he has dubbed “Rosetta's Pond” on his Montecito Creek-adjacent property, adding water and making sure it is shady and oxygenated. The Val Verde Foundation also hosts Steelhead pools. However, all these efforts could come to naught, said Lohmus, unless there is enough water flow to maintain the entire creek ecosystem, including the riparian willow forest. Itself listed as a rare habitat in Southern California, the willow forest keeps the pools cool and drops insects into the water for the Steelhead to feed upon.

Whereas Steelhead stranded for generations in a single pond become inbred, a flowing stream allows them to swim from pool to pool mixing with others of their subspecies. It also allows them to journey to the ocean, where, according to

NMFS biologist Anthony Spina, they hover around the outflow, growing large enough to fight off ocean predators, swapping genes, and waiting out droughts.

Comments

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Posted by [David Pritchett](#) (anonymous profile) on August 30, 2007 at 8:18 a.m. ([Suggest removal](#))

Local Hero.

With Marth Sadler writing up a steelhead article, the next turn goes to Chris Meagher.

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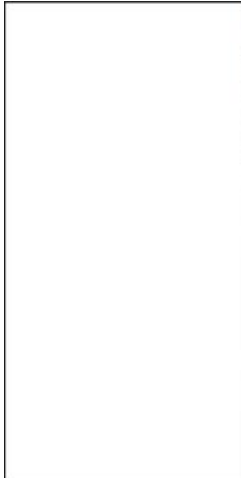
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