

Seize this chance to restore steelhead populations

Santa Barbara County residents have a historic opportunity to reverse one of the saddest environmental tragedies in this region's history. It has been 50 years since the Santa Ynez River was dammed by the Bureau of Reclamation to form Lake Cachuma and provide water for a thirsty and growing population.

As a direct result of the dam, steelhead trout, now a federally endangered species that grow to 3 feet long, have virtually disappeared from the river. Today, the State Water Board will visit the Santa Ynez River as a prelude to its October hearing when it will decide the fate of steelhead in the Santa Ynez.

Once numbering in the tens of thousands, steelhead on the river were so plentiful that people relied on them for food and even (illegally) captured them with pitchforks. Now, however, the number of steelhead that swim upriver from the Pacific Ocean through Lompoc, Buellton and Solvang is about 100 — and that is a good year. This is more than a 99 percent reduction caused by Bradbury Dam. No other species in the region may be as endangered as the steelhead.

The dam blocks migration of this magnificent fish to its spawning grounds in the headwaters of the Santa Ynez and its

tributaries. Studies show that about 80 percent of all quality spawning habitat for this species in the river lies above Bradbury Dam. Consequently, steelhead simply cannot find their way home and thus cannot reproduce in sufficient numbers to sustain their population. In addition, the very small numbers of steelhead that manage to persist below the dam are provided only meager amounts of water. No wonder this species is on the brink of extinction and is listed as endangered.

Steelhead begin their lives in freshwater streams and rivers, grow, and during their first two years go through changes to adapt to the seawater conditions. Then they migrate to the ocean. They often spend more than a year at sea maturing, and then return to freshwater streams to spawn and begin the cycle over.

Steelhead are critical ecologically, forming an important link between the marine and terrestrial environments, historically providing food for species such as condors and grizzlies and people.

They are considered the indicator species for the health of local waterways. When steelhead are present and in good condition in a river or creek, that indicates the waterway is healthy, but when they are no longer present or

are unhealthy, as is the case for most creeks in this region, it indicates poor ecological health. Perhaps the decline of this species on the Santa Ynez River represents the best example of how people have allowed our environment to be damaged.

Steelhead are considered the most prized sport fish in the western U.S., in part due to their vigor and ability to jump and fight when hooked. They are the fastest freshwater fish in the world, swimming at speeds of 21 feet per second. Their speed and ability to jump proved to be no match against Bradbury Dam.

Since the listing of Southern California steelhead as an endangered species in 1997, fishing for this elusive, tasty fish has been prohibited to prevent its complete extinction. Unfortunately, there are so few steelhead left, most people have never seen one.

However, the Federal Endangered Species Act places a high priority on recovering endangered species. State laws including the Fish and Game codes and the Public Trust Doctrine also require keeping fish in good condition and protecting the public's resources, such as steelhead and the river itself.

Rather than merely maintaining steelhead on life support, the State Water Board must take the necessary steps to substantially improve conditions for steelhead so that the species' fate will not remain uncertain. Only then will the SWB fulfill its duty to protect public

resources.

The public in this area have spoken out strongly for protection of steelhead and are working to remove dams and retrofit culverts in many creeks to try to prevent the extinction of this species and to recover steelhead. We cannot save this species alone, however.

Despite the tragic decimation of steelhead in the river, we believe there is hope to bring this rare species back from the brink. We need the SWB to look out for our interests and help us protect steelhead and other public trust resources along the river.

Steelhead can be saved and even recovered without impacting private property owners and without jeopardizing local water supplies. We can have a win-win situation on the Santa Ynez River. We can have a recovered steelhead population, recreation and water use along the river.

We ask SWB that it take back to Sacramento a sense of Santa Barbara County's burning desire to preserve and restore our natural heritage and live at one with nature. This historic, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect and promote steelhead in the river is our chance to right a 50-year-old wrong and to save a species — and an entire river — we have neglected and almost killed.

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