

Key Salinas River stakeholder: steelhead trout

Natalie Jacewicz 4:12 p.m. PDT October 23, 2015



(Photo: Provided)

Pity the steelhead trout.

The fish endures a dizzying adolescent crisis, an exhausting breeding journey — and it lives with us. As native Salinas River residents, steelhead trout are stakeholders in efforts to repair and maintain the river.

A steelhead trout — *Oncorhynchus mykiss* — begins its life in freshwater tributaries like the Arroyo Seco. Then, each fish faces a momentous “decision:” stay in the river’s fresh water and become a rainbow trout or venture into the ocean to morph into a sleek, silvery adult steelhead. After one to four years of ocean life, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, the steelhead battle the Salinas River’s current, swimming

70 miles or more to return to their freshwater breeding sites.

“Steelhead are one of the most incredible fish!” said Sasha Gennet, a senior scientist of The Nature Conservancy. “Unlike coho or Chinook-type salmon, they don’t necessarily die after they reproduce. They can go back out to the ocean and do it all over — go from fresh to salty water and back again!”

But the Salinas steelhead trout no longer perform this biological sleight of hand.

“The lack of river flow has precluded all steelhead reproduction for at least the last two years,” said Bill Stevens, who works for NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region.

And there’s the rub, according to Steve Shimek, chief executive of the conservation group Otter Project.

Shimek says “water quality and water supply are both impacting steelhead trout drastically.” Despite the steelhead’s resilience through a particularly grueling lifestyle, river quality and humans’ efforts to manage it may pose the greatest hurdle of all to the fish’s survival.

Documented average steelhead numbers have plummeted since 1946, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service caught 3,600 adult steelhead in a Salinas River survey, according to Stevens. After only five years, the number dropped to 900 adults, and today a meager troupe of 50 fish or fewer constitute the run.

The drought has assuredly hurt the fish, but other human interference with the river has also wreaked havoc for steelhead, said Shimek. In low water conditions, the fish must race through the Old Salinas River Channel to reach the ocean or to return to their breeding grounds. Because the channel has gates that often flap shut to control water flow, the fish cannot pass between the channel and the Pacific.

Shimek suggests that the fish who do enter the channel may wish they hadn’t.

Pollution plagues the water. The Otter Project sued the Monterey County Water Resources Agency earlier this year for pumping contaminated agricultural runoff into the Salinas River. In the decision, the judge deemed MCWRA a “waste discharger” and required it to report discharge in permit applications, “to the extent the Water Agency’s activities negatively affect public trust resources.” The agency said in July that it planned to appeal the decision.

The channel’s lack of native vegetation and eddies also sabotages steelhead, Shimek says.

“Good fish habitat is a meandering river which has places to rest, because fish cannot go on a hundred-mile journey against a current for days on end. They also need water that’s cold. And cover and shade creates water that’s cold.”

NOAA has endorsed screening off the channel from steelhead altogether because of its hazards.

“MCWRA initiated a screen project,” said NOAA’s Stevens. “But there were several problems encountered. Alternatives are being considered.”

Future changes to the rest of the Salinas River seem likely. The threat of El Niño floods has increased concern about the vegetation that worsens it. At recent press conferences, Salinas citizens have pressed for removal. Removing invasive plants—like arundo, which offers fish little shade—may help the steelhead, according to Shimek. But the methodology is critical.

He said that past efforts that involved bulldozing have indiscriminately eliminated species, and have sometimes failed to remove problem plants. He references old conservation efforts that relied upon the ability of workers atop large machinery to recognize and avoid tiny frogs below on the ground.

"That didn't pass the straight-face test," Shimek said.

But he said he hopes that efforts by The Nature Conservancy to integrate farming and environmental interests will generate solutions to the steelhead's plight.

Paul Robins, executive director of the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County and the leader of one of the arundo removal programs, agrees that most people have "the universal appreciation" that species like the steelhead make Salinas "a nicer place to live." But he said all parties need to be willing to "give a little bit to have multiple benefits" in a river.

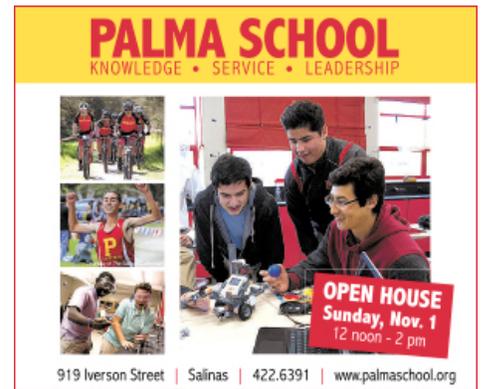
Robins emphasized that a wildlife expert accompanies his team. He shows a photo of a coastal horned lizard that the team avoided during arundo treatment.

Avoiding a species poses a challenge; bringing one back poses a greater one. But The Nature Conservancy's Gennet said steelhead have one more trick up their sleeves.

"They can also just stay in the water where they were born for many years, waiting for the right rainy conditions to come. Even if they've been landlocked for a generation, they can migrate back to the ocean when the time is right."

Humans may decide when that right time is.

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