

Friday, May 8, 1998

San Francisco Chronicle

CHRONICLE SECTIONS

Back to the Water

Children release hatchlings into Alameda Creek in bid to save trout

[Patricia Jacobus, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Friday, May 8, 1998

SUNOL -- For the past month, Pleasanton fifth-grader Erica Ward and her classmates cared for 270 steelhead trout eggs, watching with excitement as the hatchlings grew eyes and tails and eventually began wiggling around in the aquarium.

Yesterday, as part of an ongoing effort to repopulate Alameda Creek, the 10- and 11-year-olds carried the tiny hatchlings in a red cooler from Donlon Elementary School in Pleasanton to Sunol Regional Wilderness.

One by one, the children scooped the hatchlings, now big enough to live on their own, out of the cooler in clear plastic cups. Crouching on the edge of Alameda Creek, they gingerly dipped them into the rushing water.

“They're probably saying ‘Oh yeah, this is great, we're finally out in the real world!’” said Erica, spreading out her arms.

In March, a group of creek restorationists and members of the Golden West Women's Flyfishers rescued steelhead trout trying to make their way upstream to spawn.

About 10 trout were spotted trying to flop up and over a steep concrete structure blocking the creek near the Fremont BART station, said Jeff Miller of Alameda Creek Alliance, a group of conservationists.

The group captured the fish -- many of them two feet long and weighing up to seven pounds -- and dumped them back into the upper reaches of the creek in Sunol, where they could spawn safely.

“It was magical,” said environmental lawyer Brendan Cummings. “They were so powerful and so single-mindedly determined to go upstream and spawn.”

Several barriers along Alameda

Creek make it difficult for the fish to swim upstream.

One is the concrete structure near BART. Farther up the creek are three inflatable dams used to replenish the groundwater basin needed for drinking water for Union City and Newark residents.

When fully inflated, the rubber barriers are 12 feet high.

“It’s a little tough for the fish to jump across them,” acknowledged Dan Reasor, wilderness supervisor for East Bay Regional Parks.

Some of the trout, frustrated because they could not make it upstream, released their eggs in the flood control channel in Fremont. Conditions there are unsuitable for the eggs because the water is too cold, silt levels are too high, and it is too exposed, so that young steelhead have nowhere to hide, Miller said.

The fly-fishing group scooped out the eggs and called upon a member’s daughter, teacher Evelyn Frantz, who let her fifth-grade class raise the hatchlings.

The first batch died. Erica Ward said she and her classmates felt a little guilty.

“We were all so sad, because we didn’t think we would ever again be able to do something like this.”

The students said they were extra careful with the next batch of eggs.

“It was really cool,” said Kaylin Cherb, 11. “And now, it’s time to let them go off on their own.”

Miller and his group hope the hatchlings, or alevins, will stay in the creek for up to two years then drift downstream to the bay. They will spend several years swimming around in the ocean, and then it is hoped they will return to the stream and spawn, Miller said.

After the children gently poured the hatchlings into the creek they drank sparkling apple cider in celebration.

They raised their glasses and shouted a toast: “To the fish!”