

Feds Slam/Locals Open Doors to Steely Survivors

On March 5, when a neighbor living along Codornices Creek spotted two large steelhead trout—listed as threatened along California's central coast—spawning in the creek, he contacted his local advocacy group, Friends of Five Creeks. The news soon reached the Urban Creeks Council's Emma Guetzler, who went to the creek and found three steelhead—one measuring 24 inches; the other two, 17 and 15 inches. She had seen steelhead in the creek on many occasions—but none this large.

"These were clearly ocean- or Bay-going steelhead. It blew my mind," says Guetzler.

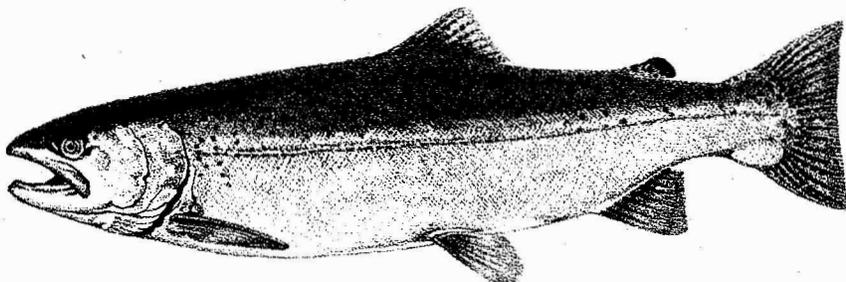
Time was that the positive identification of some endangered species in a creek or wild area would put that place on the path to receiving federal designation as "critical habitat"—the idea being that that place is needed for the endangered species to thrive and survive. But despite years of sweat equity on the part of residents, creek groups, and the cities of Albany and Berkeley to restore Codornices Creek for steelhead, hopes for an official critical habitat designation were dashed in January. That's when the Bush administration issued its new rules and listed critical habitat designations for West Coast salmon and steelhead. Not a single East Bay creek made the list, a fact the Alameda Creek Alliance's Jeff Miller finds exasperating.

"Excluding [creeks like Alameda and Codornices] from the critical habitat designation means they don't consider it important for the recovery of steelhead," says Miller.

The Endangered Species Act is intended to protect the land and water a dwindling species needs for survival. A critical habitat designation often includes areas where a species is spotted and where land is needed (in the case of fish, the riparian habitat alongside a stream as well as the stream itself) to support a future increased population, marking its recovery. Once an area is designated as critical, activities such as commercial logging or developing a housing tract are not supposed to degrade or destroy these habitats. Critics of the policy, including the National Association of Homebuilders, assert that far too much land is being taken out of use for development with little in the way of species recovery to show for it.

The Bush administration has been sympathetic to the viewpoint of developers, say enviros. It has employed an aggressive cost-benefit analysis that has served to reduce the size of critical habitat designations by 69%, according to a 2004 report from the National Wildlife Federation. This loss of critical habitat can have its own cost. Miller says his group and local and state agencies are prepared to put in about \$10 million to restore Alameda Creek—including tie-ins for public safety and recreation trails. Millions of dollars are being spent in similar restoration efforts throughout the state, including on Codornices Creek, so the reduction in critical habitat designations

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could jeopardize this investment of public money if prime habitat is allowed to be developed or degraded.

For Miller, of particular concern in the Bush administration's ruling is the way the White House defined the West Coast steelhead population. Every year for the past nine years, Alameda Creek advocates have recorded the upstream migration of steelhead. Miller's group took fin clips to the leading fish genetics expert at the U.S. Geological Survey for analysis and found that while some trout remained in the creek and reservoirs and others swam out to the ocean and returned to spawn, they were all the same species—steelhead.

Miller says his group presented this evidence to the National Marine Fisheries Service, which proposed to include the resident steelhead trout in Alameda Creek as part of the threatened population. Such a distinction would have increased the chance that Alameda Creek would be designated as critical habitat.

Then the Bush administration weighed in: It didn't take the genetic evidence into account in its ruling. So oversight of the ocean-going fish was given to the National Marine Fisheries Service while the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service was given jurisdiction over their creek- and reservoir-dwelling cousins. Miller likens the designation to treating various life phases of the same species as though they were radically different.

"It's like you listed the monarch butterfly but not the caterpillar," says Miller.

Dennis McEwan of Cal Fish & Game says that this split jurisdiction—long the status quo in the federal government—isn't justified. In other words, a steelhead is a steelhead, but it can have a variety of lifestyles. McEwan says research examining the chemical makeup of the inner ear bone or otolith of the trout gives clues as to those lifestyles. This test is not easily or often done as it's performed only on dead trout. Using the otolith method, scientists look for strontium—a chemical similar to calcium—which is present in higher concentrations in the ocean than in freshwater. An otolith with lots of strontium indicates that a trout is ocean-going.

The otolith also carries the signature of the

mother's egg. Inside that signature, scientists also look for strontium. What they're finding, says McEwan, is that parentage doesn't necessarily determine whether a trout will remain in freshwater or go out to the ocean. So a progeny of two resident steelhead—often called rainbow trout—can be another resident trout or an ocean-going fish. Even two progeny from the same parents can be different—one ocean-going and the other resident.

Sound confusing? McEwan says developers with land use proposals and others have exploited common misperceptions over whether a resident fish is a "real" steelhead in order to get their plans approved. "The fallacy of that argument from a biological standpoint is that you'll have juvenile fish included in the count and even that fish doesn't know what it is. Its life history fate has yet to be determined," he explains.

Differences in steelhead lifestyle aside, the efforts to bring back central California coast steelhead have been dealt a great blow by the Bush administration's critical habitat ruling. The very listing of steelhead as threatened protects the fish itself, but steelhead that call the California central coast home need more than that, says McEwan, adding that by cutting critical habitat, the government is downplaying the importance of habitat to a species' survival. "It risks disassociating species from their habitat in the public's mind, and that's a recipe for extinction."

Meanwhile, residents along Codornices Creek—spurred on by the news of the steelhead spawning—are going to do their best to treat the creek as critical habitat even though the federal government may not. The size of the steelhead in the creek, they say, is evidence that recovery efforts pay off and are worth supporting. Friends of Five Creeks' Susan Schwartz, who captured spawning and sleeping steelhead on film and posted the clip to her group's Web site, recalls what she thought while witnessing the fish.

"To see that in your backyard makes you realize that if you open the door, nature will come back."

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