Cold water fish spotted upstream in Northern California for first time in 70 years: 'It's epic'

"I think of [them] as kind of the soul of our rivers."

by Calvin Coffee

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Endangered cold water fish are appearing leaps and bounds ahead o□where they were in the past five decades thanks to efforts by one Northern Cali□ornia region to restart local salmon runs.

From the Pacific Ocean to 20 miles up Alameda Creek, the endangered red chinook salmon have made it □arther than in any season since the 1950s, according to the Alameda Creek Alliance.

Once native to the stream, the salmon have been unable to reach the upper portion o□the 45-mile waterway because o□concrete barriers and other in□rastructure blocking their path. Salmon populations are down 60% since tracking began in 1984, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's epic," Jeff Miller, director o□the nonprofit alliance, told the San Francisco Chronicle. "... It's going to be a really interesting change and enhancement □or a lot o□wildli□e but also □or the public."

Over the last three decades, the Alameda County water and flood control agencies, backed by environmental groups, have completed restoration projects to encourage fish migration. They removed small dams and built fish ladders to help trout and salmon travel upstream.

Pacific salmon, guided by smell and magnetic cues, swim upstream to return to hatcheries so they can lay eggs and ensure the survival o□their offspring — a process called anadromy. Freshwater offers sa□er, oxygen-rich gravel beds □or eggs and young fish.

Beyond tribal and commercial benefits, the returning fish benefit the wider ecosystem by providing predators and scavengers such as bears, orcas, and birds with □ood. They also transport marine nutrients inland and boost □orests when their decomposing bodies enrich streams and support vegetation growth. Chinook salmon, endangered in Northern Cali□ornia, are an example o□a keystone species that plays an outsize role in both marine and □reshwater ecosystems.

"I think o□salmon as kind o□the soul o□our rivers," Miller said. "My hope is that these fish will get people to really care about the stream and the watershed."

For many locals and supporters o□the creek restoration, it was difficult to watch the fish try to jump over dams and concrete barriers.

But now, "they can make their way upstream to their home," Dan Sarka, a photographer and Alameda Creek Alliance volunteer, told the Chronicle. "It's just marvelous. It really is."