

YOUR INDEPENDENT SOURCE FOR BAY-DELTA NEWS & VIEWS

ECTIADV



AUGUST 2006

VOLUME 15, NO. 4

PEOPLE

MAN OF STEEL(HEAD)

As Jeff Miller describes the glistening steel-colored fish he has held in his hands, carried past dams, and advocated for, often in front of hostile audiences, I can't help but think how much the man resembles the fish. "They're amazing. They're inspiring and awesome—they're designed to fight their way upstream, and they don't want to be denied," says Miller.

Neither does he. For the past decade Miller has been arguing that there is—and could be a much greater and more sustainable—steelhead run in Alameda Creek, the East Bay's largest creek, despite its many dams, water rights issues, and other constraints. Miller got involved in 1997, when he founded the Alameda Creek Alliance, building on the long-standing efforts of a group of fishermen who had been advocating throughout the 1980s for steelhead restoration. "They grew up fishing on the creek; they were out there moving fish past the rubber dams," says Miller. "They ran up against the water districts telling them to forget it." CalTrout filed a water rights complaint against the San Francisco PUC, and the complaint was settled in the mid-1990s, yet the PUC still has not released any of the promised water, says Miller.

Miller's interest in Alameda Creek came at a good time for the steelhead, which had just been federally listed as threatened. "People had kind of given up," he recalls. Miller had been working on old growth (Headwaters) forest issues, but wanted to get his hands wet in something more local. After seeing the coho salmon run on Marin County's Lagunitas Creek, he "kept thinking, 'there's gotta be a creek in the East Bay where we could restore salmon and steelhead like that; I tried to figure out who needed help.'" He started walking Alameda Creek.

"I talked to everyone I could—fly fishermen, biologists, the Cal Trout people involved in the settlement, people at the water districts. I tried to learn everything I could about the creek." At that point, says Miller, he realized that if dams were ever going to start coming down, "it was going to take a lot of pressure and some effective organizing. The water districts had already rejected the idea of restoring a steelhead run; in their view the issue was over. I set about trying to do some community organizing, getting people excited and documenting the fact that steelhead and salmon were trying to get upstream to spawn." Although the fisherman knew there were fish in the creek, says Miller,



the water districts—and even Fish and Game—said there were no fish or if there were, they had to be hatchery strays.

The Alliance had genetic analysis performed on fins that proved that the Alameda Creek fish were not hatchery strays. Miller visited all of the agencies in person to try to convince them to sign on to the restoration effort. "I was naïve," he says. "I thought it would take a few letters, some lobbying, the threat of a lawsuit—after all, steelhead were a listed species. Well, it didn't work that way." He remembers going to an Alameda County Water District Board meeting representing the Alameda Creek Alliance, which, at that point, had an official membership of one. "They looked at me like some hippie from Berkeley," he laughs. Miller quickly realized that he was in the fight for the long haul. "It's such a big watershed, and there are so many agencies involved, and issues like water supply and flood control." What he also began to realize is that he was tackling an even bigger obstacle than removing dams—that of agency culture. "We had to try to get them to change that old way of thinking that any water that made it to the Bay was wasted."

Miller cultivated relationships with the media, sending out press releases and sponsoring media events. Forty to 50 people began showing up at each Alliance meeting, says Miller, and coming out for fish rescues, many of which were written up in local papers or shown on TV. (Today, the alliance has 750 paying members.) "It was/is a multi-pronged attack," he says. "We came at them from every angle. We leaned on the regulatory agencies, got them to talk tougher, bombarded them with pressure. We went to some elected representatives and got them to weigh in—that was very helpful." Miller says that basically, he's an "old school activist. I'm a big fan of community organizing. To be able to go to a meeting and say you represent 750 residents—that gives you a bit of moral authority and force."

In 1999, he helped put together a stakeholder group of federal and state wildlife agencies, water districts, enviros, fishermen, and

others. About three years into the effort, he says, he realized that what he was doing was really almost a full-time job, so he started writing grants to support himself. He also realized that he would have to help the agencies find funding for restoration and made it clear to them that they would receive lots of kudos for their efforts. CEMAR's Andy Gunther lauds Miller's ability to encourage cooperation and consensus. "What makes Jeff so effective is his excellent combination of public organizing skills, knowledge of the law, and a willingness to work with other stakeholders and not just be confrontational. That has resulted in building a very productive dialogue in the Alameda Creek watershed." The S.F. PUC's Tim Ramirez concurs. "Jeff is one of those unique people who can see the big picture of a national policy issue and can also speak to the details of its application to a specific creek. He takes firm positions, but understands and values building trust among diverse interests to solve problems."

Although there is still a lot of work to be done on Alameda Creek before fish will migrate upstream again freely, Miller is both surprised and thrilled to see a sea change in agency attitudes. "There's genuine enthusiasm and ownership now. All of the agencies who own barriers on the creek are pursuing funding to take them down," he says. "It's just a matter of finding the money and making it happen." Specifically, he hopes that dams at Niles Canyon and Sunol will be removed by this time next year.

When he's not wearing his Alameda Creek hat, Miller works for the Center for Biological Diversity on endangered species/urban sprawl issues. "I do everything from writing endangered species listing petitions to media to campaigns to protect condors, raptors at Altamont Pass, endangered species from pesticide use, green sturgeon, Delta smelt, etc." Although he doesn't have a background in biology (he majored in engineering, math, and rhetoric, and studied botany), he says he reads all the literature, and has learned a lot from the experts he works with.

What keeps him motivated despite what must seem at times like a snail's crawl pace in restoring this watershed? "I'm stubborn. I don't like being told 'no,' or 'we can't do it,' especially when I know something's possible. When I walk the creek, it's crying out to me that it wants its fish back." His most rewarding experiences have occurred when he's been out on the creek rescuing and moving fish upstream past barriers. "Seeing people's reactions—their enthusiasm about being able to do something, anything to help is really gratifying—especially people who have never seen a steelhead before and ask 'what's that?'" Miller says a friend of his put it best. "It's such an amazing thing when you're rescuing these fish—you have the raw power of nature right there in your hand. It made me

understand fly fishermen a little bit the first time I netted one."

As Ramirez puts it, Miller is both persistent and optimistic, a combination that bodes well for the future of Alameda Creek fish. But Miller also knows that the time to move forward is now. "It's hard to get momentum and public support, and we have it. That's one of my motivations—if the ball gets dropped now, forget it." Looking at the state's future water challenges is another motivator, says Miller. "I want to make sure we get flows legally dedicated for these fish. In 20 years we may not be able to have this conversation." LOV

Ed's note: Watch for a special insert this fall on the challenges facing Alameda Creek.