

Protecting Our Endangered Species Keeps California Beautiful

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Drought cycles and resulting fresh water resource depletions renew the century-old battle in California to find a sustainable balance of protected wilderness and increased human population demands in our home state. Many of these skirmishes wind up in courtrooms, the issues confused in the layperson's mind by the labyrinth of regulatory edicts, misperceptions and hearing room proceedings.

Portrayed in the media as "*Humans vs. Nature*," zero-sum games, many residents are unaware of the nexus between preservation and restoration of eco-systems for endangered species and improved safe environs for us all. A recent decision by NOAA's National Marines Fisheries Service due to years of lobbying by the *Clean Water Now! Coalition* (CWN!C: Est. 1998) provides an excellent example of how these local grass roots efforts succeed in assuring future generations of the heritage they and their children deserve.

Briefly, CWN!C is a watershed protection group focused upon reversing the water quality impairments that affect aquatic and riparian biota. In the case of Aliso Creek, a renowned polluted watercourse rife with the "*toxic soup*" of urban runoff, we find the formal recognition last month by NMFS of the creek as one of Southern California's *Distinct Population Segments* for the federally endangered Steelhead Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) to be fortuitous. Illegal dumping, past and present, of contaminants upstream that have impact spans of decades haunt this and many of California's watersheds. Increasing urbanization continues a constant drip feed of carcinogenic substances unabated, transported by urban runoff.

Frustrated by little change in Aliso for 10 years, several years ago Board member Mike Hazzard and I formed a working group, "*Friends of the Aliso Creek Steelhead*" <http://www.alisocreeksteelhead.org/>. The only watchdog organization to achieve any significant enforcement actions by Cal/EPA within the Aliso Creek Watershed, CWN!C knew that water quality and habitat monitoring continued to show degradation and entropy. Many indigenous species populations were either decimated or non-existent due to abuse. We were confounded by local jurisdictional denial of steelhead historical presence in Aliso, so we developed a detailed database to support our contention and provided it to NMFS.

Sometimes a fountain pen or the tap of a few computer terminal keys by regulatory overseers can do what threats, cajoling, demands and even sound science cannot. In this case, *O. mykiss* also enjoys a more elevated status because it qualifies as an *Evolutionary Significant*

Unit (ESU): It is a separate species from its cousins, unique to the Mediterranean climate of Southern California and Northern Baja Mexico.

"Anadromous," it migrates from salt to fresh (where it spawns) back to salt water during its life-cycle, and you may know it as the beautiful multi-colored Rainbow Trout, its in-stream incarnation. Adapted to the warmer, more ephemeral coastal streams of our area, this opportunistic salmonoid can survive environs with less oxygen than its northerly counterparts. Remarkably, it need not return to the watercourse or estuary where it as born.

If a stream has steelhead in it, then one can assume it's safe and healthy enough for human immersion. This is what USEPA Clean Water Act guidance deems these types of waters *"fishable and swimmable"*. It's three primary requirements, low toxicity, low temperature and high dissolved oxygen (DO) content are the markers biologists have encouraged our state public agencies to honor for optimal water quality objectives and standards. What's good for the steelhead all over California is therefore actually good for humans too.

What's next? For us the sustaining of our contention regarding **O. mykiss** by NMFS will assist us in reversing the distress within this watershed. Higher standards will be integrated in the regulatory oversight food chain, almost every water-related project will get closer planning scrutiny, and hopefully not require litigation or enforcement action to do so.

For the steelhead it'll mean eventual restoration and recolonization, a So Cal native fish given a chance to finally come safely home again. Someday, a child will gaze into this creek with wonder and awe at this amazing survivor.

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He's also a 38-year residential and commercial builder, public speaker, professional environmental consultant, ecological journalist, and the Beach Manager for all of the California Coastal Commission volunteer beach cleanup programs in Laguna Beach.

His work on urban runoff in 2001 resulted in an award from the LA Times (OC Bureau) and personal accolades by the OC Grand Jury.

He initiated the Proud Community Affiliate program in Laguna for Keep California Beautiful: <http://www.keepcaliforniabeautiful.org/>

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