

# A new approach to fixing river's steelhead habitat

By NANCY SCHACHTER

Numerous governmental agencies will soon be asked to change practices that affect the Pajaro River and its tributaries, to improve the river system's steelhead habitat.

The requests will come to the agencies in the form of a report prepared for the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, or AMBAG.

The draft report, of a study begun in 1981 and funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, was recently completed and has been circulated among the many agencies that share responsibility for the river system's management, including the counties of Santa Cruz, Monterey, Santa Clara and San Benito, the cities of Morgan Hill and Watsonville, the state Department of Fish and Game, the Coastal Commission, Caltrans, the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

"Part of the reason there is a problem is there are so many agencies that can have an impact that it doesn't take much for one agency to have a negative impact," said Julie Brandlin, who oversaw the study for AMBAG.

Most of the "negative impacts" were the result of ignorance about what can be done to protect the habitat, she said, so the results of the habitat study will be used to educate the agencies concerned.

The study focused on steelhead trout, which are native to the Pajaro River system and which are more sensitive to the varying quality of the habitat than are the other kinds of wildlife with which they share the river system, Ms. Brandlin said.

"If steelhead are doing well, then other fish and wildlife (in the system) will be doing well," she said.

The report does not give statistics on the decline of the steelhead population, but it does explain the problem.

"Construction and agricultural activities, flood control measures, dams and diversions, and increasing erosion and sedimentation have all contributed to degradation of stream habitat in the Pajaro Basin," the report says.

The health of the steelhead

population depends on how well the fish can pass through the river and streams and on the habitats for spawning and rearing.

Steelhead migrate upstream to spawning areas beginning each October and continuing through the winter months, but in many areas barriers block their passage. The barriers range from bridge abutments and diversion dams to logjams and boulders that fell into the water.

An additional problem is that water flow isn't always sufficient to allow the fish to swim upstream.

Although there is a limit to the good spawning habitat, which requires gravel on the stream bottom, there appear to be enough adequate spawning pools to allow as many fish to be hatched as the rearing habitats can handle, according to the report.

It's the lack of adequate rearing habitats that limit the steelhead population, the report says. Low water flow, erosion, river obstructions and lack of necessary fish food are all responsible for the decline of the rearing habitats, and thus the decline of the steelhead population.

Now that the habitat study has been completed, the next step, Ms. Brandlin said, is to educate the various agencies on the things they can do to improve the habitat.

"There are certain things they can do that will not affect their operation significantly, but will make a major improvement in the habitat," she said. For instance, water could be released from the Uvas and Llagas reservoirs in Santa Clara County when the fish need more water to facilitate their migration upstream.

Having learned of its effect on the river system, the Gavilan Water District has already agreed to change its practices and release water from its reservoirs when it would most help the steelhead, Ms. Brandlin said. "The study is educational. (The Gavilan Water District) didn't know it would make a difference and now that they do, they are willing to change."

While the report outlines many other suggestions for improving the Pajaro River habitat, one with great significance, Ms. Brandlin said, is the removal of natural and man-made barriers from the waters, "because the barriers are just keeping fish out of the areas where they could be spawning and rearing."

The draft report has been forwarded to the various river-managing agencies, and public meetings to discuss it will be held in Gilroy and Watsonville within the next few weeks.

AMBAG has no power to enforce the recommendations made in the report, but it will encourage helpful changes, Ms. Brandlin said.

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE  
REGISTER PAJARONIAN  
May 14, 1984