



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A bulldozer punches through the sandbar Thursday at Rio del Mar Beach, allowing Aptos Creek to drain.

Putrid coastal pool drained

Search for endangered fish fails, so workers proceed with trench

By DAN WHITE

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RIO DEL MAR — Dragging a net and sporting hip waders, a field biologist and three helpers searched a polluted pond and stream Thursday for an endangered fish.

But after several hours, no one could find a trace of the 2-inch tidewater goby on Rio del Mar Beach. State Department of Parks and Recreation workers then went ahead with a plan to bulldoze a path to the ocean, draining the pond and stream.

Aptos Creek normally drains straight into

the ocean. But this year, a sandbar formed, creating a meandering stream and pond. The mud-burrowing fish was the one potential hurdle standing in the way of plowing through the sandbar and releasing the bacteria-laden water.

State workers wanted to drain the water because county health officials recently found high levels of fecal coliform bacteria in Aptos Creek.

Aquatic biologist Donald Alley led the goby search as 20 people stood around and watched. "Want to see some gobies?" said one

father excitedly to his son. There were a few dramatic moments as Alley dragged the stream, checked his net and found something glinting in the sun.

But it always turned out to be a stickleback, baby steelhead or wriggling invertebrate. "So far, so good. No gobies," Alley said.

Gobies don't have the crowd-pleasing appeal of other endangered beasts such as the grizzly or condor. But they occupy a niche in the aquatic world. Alley described the goby as a resilient creature that tolerates fresh or

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Goby

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salty water. The males dig burrows. Each one tries to attract a female, and they mate in the burrow.

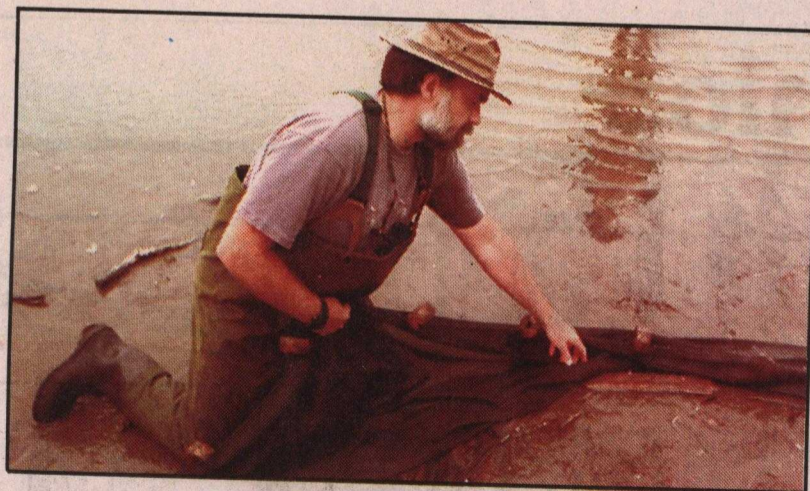
The male spends so much energy guarding the eggs that it doesn't even eat. Most males starve to death just after the eggs hatch.

"Most of them only live one year," Alley said. "If they live one winter, they're lucky."

They can also blend with their surroundings. This, along with their tiny size, makes them difficult to spot.

All of this surveying for fish made for a small spectacle. "We were wondering when they were going to open this up," said Karen Belick of Rio del Mar, watching Alley working on the beach Thursday. "We had no idea it would get so complicated. If you are in a bureaucracy, you have no choice, but you need to take into consideration the safety of people who don't read the warning signs."

"My kids have never been sick," Belick said. "But I've never let them play in that water."



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Aquatic biologist Donald Alley searches for the endangered tidewater goby Thursday at Aptos Creek.

The trouble started earlier this year when the waves built up the sandbar. The build-up changed the course of Aptos Creek, forming the pool and the 300-foot-long stream.

These warm, shallow waters attracted small children, despite posted warning signs, and were a source of concern for lifeguards and the county Health Services Agency, which had detected high bacteria levels in the water. State workers found themselves trying to protect public health while si-

multaneously protecting gobies.

The bulldozing required the cooperation of state parks, the state Department of Fish and Game, the state Coastal Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state Regional Water Quality Control Board and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. At the Thursday bulldozing, three state parks employees and two Fish and Game representatives, along with Alley, the aquatic biologist, were all on the scene.