

Saving the salmon

Fish and Fishing



Providencia Martinez and student volunteers helped carry buckets of smolts from a tank on the back of a truck down to the stream.

Dan Coyro/
Sentinel photos

Volunteers plant 5,000 fish in hopes of restoring species

By JOHN BESSA
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NORTH COAST — Waddell Creek had about 5,000 new visitors Friday — coho salmon smolts planted by volunteers trying to revitalize the fish, which is approaching the federal threatened species list.

The fish plant was nothing new — fish have been raised for release in the area since the early 1900s — but the salmon released Friday are.

Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project volunteers are hoping the fish will return to spawn in the creek inside Big Basin Redwoods State Park — and eventually boost the species' number to reverse a losing battle the fish have been waging over the past two decades.

To improve the chances the species will make a

comeback, volunteers immunized the fish against a bacterial kidney disease that has played havoc on the fish in the past.

"Basically, everywhere we look for (the disease), we find it," said Dave Steig, project fish biologist and hatchery manager.

The disease attacks the fish when they try to go from fresh water to salt water and when they return to fresh water.

The attack is especially vicious when the fish try to go up their native streams to spawn, Steig said.

"Basically, they're dead the minute they hit that fresh water," Steig said.

The Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project were assisted Friday by students from Renaissance High School in Watsonville and San Lorenzo Valley



Ron Hinchcliff releases young salmon into Waddell Creek.

Salmon

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High School. The kids carried buckets of fish.

The process of planting the fish was relatively simple — scoop some out of a tank on the back of a truck, drop them in a bucket and dump them in the creek — but how the little smolts grew to a size where they could live was a little more work, said Matt McCaslin, education coordinator of the project.

"All of these fish have been raised through volunteer effort," said McCaslin, who is also a Santa Cruz fire captain.

"A lot of man hours have gone into this project," he said.

The work is hard, but fulfilling, said Ron Hinchcliff, a project volunteer.

Hinchcliff spent the past year spawning eggs and raising the fish in the hatchery.

"Now I'm helping to release them and it's a good feeling," he said as he gently poured five-gallon buckets of the fish into a hole near the confluence of the east and the west forks of the creek.

The fish will leave the creek in April and head to the sea under cover of darkness, McCaslin said.

After feeding for a year or two, the salmon will return to the stream to release their eggs and die.

Only a handful of the fish will return to do that, project officials said. Fewer than 2 percent of the 5,000 creatures released will live to swim up the creek and drop their eggs in the gravel beds where they can hatch.

The high mortality of the fish is leading the entire species toward extinction, said Jennifer Nelson, state Department of Fish and Game salmon and steelhead biologist.

There are several reasons besides kidney disease why so many fish die before spawning.

Predation, over-fishing, polluted water and dwindling food supplies caused by a lack of upwelling in currents are blamed for the small number of coho salmon.

The Salmon and Trout Project volunteers are not the only ones to plant fish in streams.

Children from Gonzales to San Francisco are raising and releasing steelhead into their nearby streams after learning about the fish from the Salmon and Trout Project volunteers.

The project visits schools throughout the area to teach kids about the life history of the fish and the species' habitat requirements, McCaslin said.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

A bucket brigade of volunteers hauls coho salmon smolts toward the creek Friday.

More than 25,000 children have been visited in the six years the group has had an education program.

Currently, 71 classrooms are raising fish to be released into the students' local streams, McCaslin said.

Helping fish is fun for older kids too, the teens from Renaissance and San Lorenzo Valley high schools said.

"It sounded fun. It is," said Mandie Perez, a Re-

naissance student.

"But it's harder than it looks," she said as she hefted a bucketful of the thrashing coho.

Most helpers got splashed with water from the fish for their efforts.

A small price to pay, said Andy Snyder from San Lorenzo Valley High School.

"It was a neat thing to do, helping out the environment in a kind of first-hand sort of deal," he said.