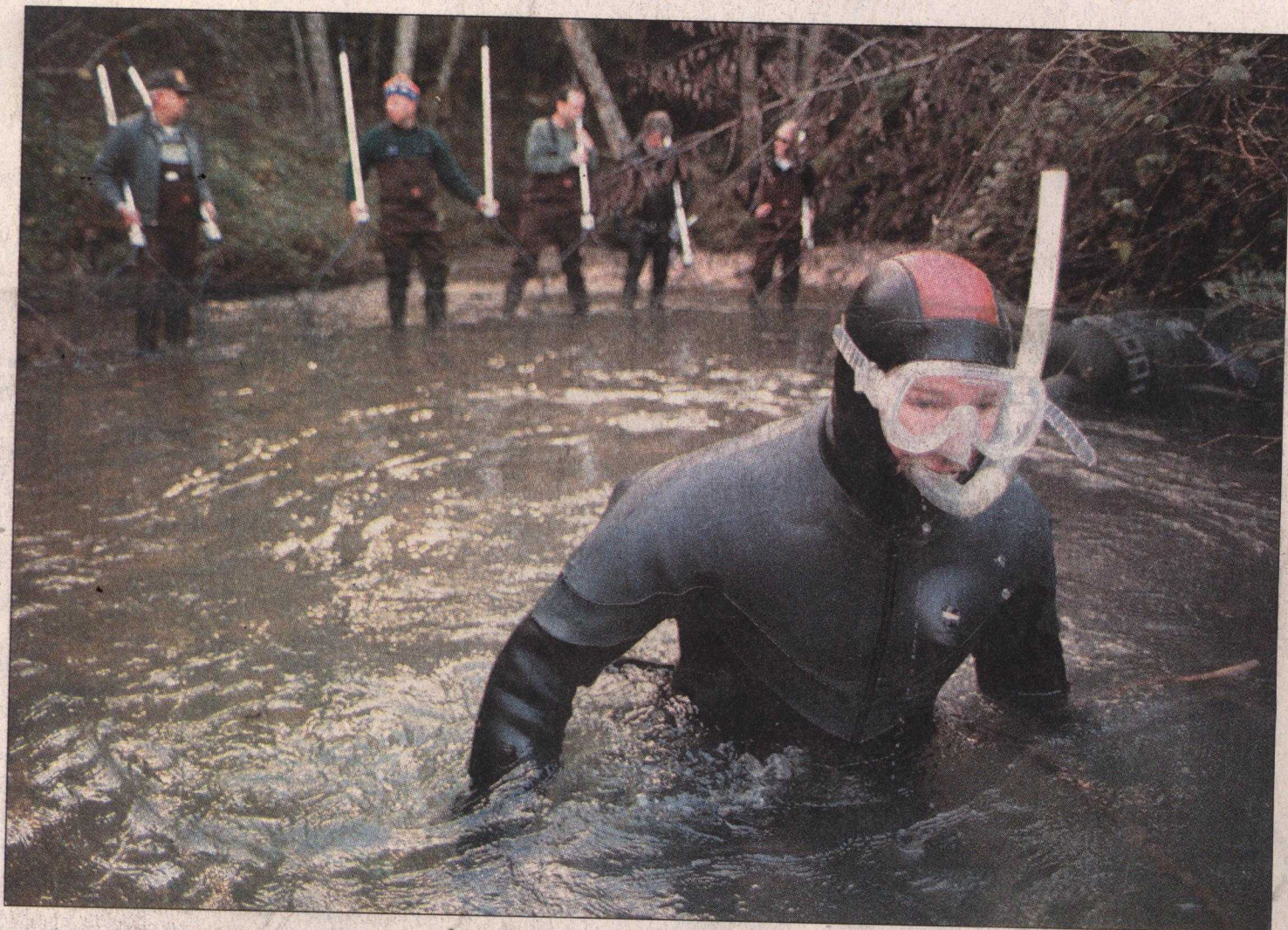


# SALMON RUN

Coho show increased numbers in annual return



Matt Rowley, a volunteer with the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project, stalks the waters of Mill Creek in Swanton last week in an attempt to flush coho salmon out of hiding so they can be used for breeding in the local hatchery. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

By BRIAN SEALS  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Each winter, along Scott Creek just north of Davenport, diehard fish lovers trudge through the 50-degree water in a hunt for coho salmon. But they're not seeking a meal. They want to save a species.

For the past 20 years, members of the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project have been volunteering their time to catch adult steelhead and coho salmon to send to a nearby hatchery to reproduce.

Most years, they snare a few.

This year, though, the creek is teeming — relatively speaking of course. Since December, the group has netted 36 coho for reproduction, compared to seven last year, none of

which were female.

"This year is an excellent return," volunteer Allen Smith said, obviously pleased, as he took a break from his creek work on a recent weekday morning. "We feel there's some recovery effect taking place here."

The numbers are encouraging, but not necessarily a sign of restoration, experts caution. The high numbers could simply reflect an up year in the species' cyclical existence, Smith said, and biologists and fish enthusiasts agree the end of their work is years off.

But the local numbers appear to be part of a larger phenomenon, as hatcheries up the California coast report generally positive coho returns this winter:

■ At the Mad River Hatchery in Arcata, 12 coho have returned from the ocean, the same number as last year.

■ Farther north, the Iron Gate Hatchery in Hornbrook has recorded more than 2,400 returning coho, hatchery manager Kim Rush-ton said. That is the third highest in the hatchery's 40-year history and more than double last year's return of 723.

■ Doug Alban of the state Department of Fish and Game said biologists in Mendocino County are observing more coho in streams there, too.

"The people around here looking at coho have found the size of the runs are definitely larger," Alban added.

That's good news for a fish that desperately needs some.

Declining coho stocks led to the fish's listing as a federally threatened species in 1996. Under state environmental laws, coho salmon

Please see **COHO** on **BACK PAGE**



## Coho salmon

*Onorhynchus kisutch*

**SIZE:** 2 feet, 8 pounds

**HABITAT:** Spends the first half of its 2- to 3-year life cycle in freshwater

streams. Then it migrates to the Pacific and later returns to its birthplace to spawn.

**RANGE:** Northern Pacific Ocean from Central California to the Aleutians and Japan.

**STATUS:** On the U.S. threatened species list; California endangered species list.

Sources: National Marine Fisheries Service; Canada Division of Fisheries and Oceans



# Coho: Endangered salmon return in greater numbers to area streams

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are considered endangered.

They are cousins to the chinook (or king) salmon sought by commercial and recreational anglers up and down the West Coast.

Scientists continue to seek answers to why the number of coho and other salmon types have been declining. Destruction of habitat, disease, overfishing and shifts in ocean temperatures are under study as possible culprits.

As for the apparently higher numbers of coho this year, many say it simply could be part of a cycle.

Female coho have a three-year life span. The fish coming back to North Coast streams this year are part of a class that traditionally has been more numerous and hearty.

In other words, they are the offspring of a healthy class that spawned three years ago, when the project caught about 26 coho. The offspring of females spawning this year should return in 2005, said state Fish and Game biologists Jennifer Nelson.

The ocean and creek conditions are also good this year. Heavy rains this winter have kept creek mouths open longer, giving the fish — both coho and the closely related steelhead trout — ample time to return to their native streams. The heavy flows also clean the creeks and create areas where coho can rest as they fight upstream to spawn.

Aiding the coho population, said Bob McFarlane of the National Marine Fisheries Service, is that eastern Pacific waters have been cooling since 1998.

Cooler water is more conducive to the fish's feeding and reproduction.

McFarlane said temperatures in the coho's range, the southernmost limits of which is the Central Coast, are cooler by 1 to 4 degrees.

"We are just beginning to see good returns (of coho)," McFarlane said. "It's happening as waters cool. We might be into a good long run of ocean conditions that will help salmon stocks."

Another clue to the cooler waters can be found in other forms of salmon. Chum salmon are not typically found in California waters, but some have been found in Marin County streams this year, McFarlane said.

## Off-limits to anglers

Fishermen are barred from keeping coho because of its threatened status.

In some creeks, anglers can keep hatchery-raised steelhead, but in all creeks must let the wild steelhead and all coho go unharmed. They can tell the difference because hatchery-raised fish have a clipped fin on their backs.

The whole issue is controversial.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Volunteers from the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project capture a coho salmon for use in breeding.

Many environmentalists criticize recovery efforts using hatchery fish, saying their genetic code is different — and inferior — to wild fish, and that they simply compete with the wild stock for food and habitat once they are released. Moreover, there is fear the hatchery-raised fish can introduce diseases to the wild fish.

But backers say the hatcheries play an important role in restoration and stocks would

be further endangered without their work.

"It's not the total solution, but we think it's part of the solution," Smith said.

The Monterey Bay project seeks to diversify the coho gene pool by taking fish over an extended period, rather than getting all they can get in a short time. And they only take wild fish for reproduction.

The bottom line is to increase the number of coho and steelhead.

"It's going to be tough to make them reappear, but it can be done," said Dave Streig, the only staff member for the otherwise all-volunteer group. "These are the last of the local stock. What there is needs to be protected or restored."

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