

Albacore plays role in work to preserve salmon, steelhead

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WHAT DO albacore tuna have to do with efforts to increase local salmon and steelhead runs? Plenty. The 16th annual Albacore Feed is scheduled for Saturday, Nov. 13, with proceeds from this always convivial affair going toward the hatchery and education programs aimed at filling our rivers and streams with highly prized fish.

The feed, jointly sponsored by the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project (MBSTP) and the Castroville Rotary Club, is looked forward to each year as an opportunity for people from all around Monterey Bay to share an evening of good spirits as well as to support a worthy cause.

"The rains last year were a blessing we hardly dared hope for," said Dave Streig, director of the hatchery at Big Creek where life begins for both salmon and steelhead raised by MBSTP staff and volunteers.

"For the first time in six years, streams broke through to the ocean and the fish were able to return to their home creeks and rivers to spawn. All the diligence and enthusiasm in the world won't help if returning fish numbers keep dropping," he added. "We have our fingers crossed that this will be at least a normal year as far as rainfall is concerned."

Several years ago Dave took me up into northern Santa Cruz County where the hatchery is located. On our way in from the coast, we passed bubbling creeks surrounded by stately groves of trees. Occasionally we stopped, so Dave could point out streambeds used by migrating fish. In the silence one could imagine how serene this forest must have been before the rude intrusion of civilization. We entered a clearing where the hatchery was located and saw that it was feeding time. No wonder the fish are thriving; they seem to have tremendous appetites. Each salmon begins life here as a small orange egg, cradled in just the right-sized gravel and washed by the clear water of a swiftly flowing stream. Only about 10 percent of the thousands of eggs a female lays will survive, according to the information Dave gave me. Each small fingerling will spend about a year in its native stream, undergoing changes which will allow it to

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live in the ocean.

During this time, one of the most intriguing aspects of a salmon's life cycle takes place. "Odor information" of each particular fresh water stream is stamped into a fingerling's memory.

"It's like a fingerprint," Dave said. "In the future these fish will recognize their native stream and no other."

After a year in fresh water, the fish will travel downstream to the sea, risking predators en route and often fighting through water courses clogged by debris from logging and construction. They will spend the next two years in salt water growing and maturing.

At the end of that time, they feel a mysterious pull to return to the precise fresh water location where they were hatched. Obviously the chances of surviving this cycle are slim, under the best of conditions, but the obstacles put in the way of migrating fish by coastal development during the past few decades made many people wonder whether historic salmon and steelhead runs would be choked off entirely.

This is where MBSTP came in. Inspired by the work of the late Dr. Tom Thompson, and continued by his widow and daughters, the group was formed in 1976 and set about tackling the problem in two ways.

First, hatcheries and holding tanks, such as the one I visited, were constructed. Under the guidance of professional biologists, volunteers help in feeding, spawning, fin clipping and planting. Secondly, an environmental education program was established to help school children become more aware of the inter-relationships affecting local watersheds. Abbreviated to STEP (Salmon and Trout Education Program), it allows students to take an active part in the protection and preservation of their own natural resources. The program is offered in more than 30 schools from San Francisco to Carmel.

All of this takes money and the annual barbecue on Nov. 13th will help sustain these projects. The dinner is scheduled to begin at 7:30 at the Recreation Center, 11621 Crane St., Castroville. By the way, those who might wish to donate their time as a volunteer are invited to call the hatchery at (408) 458-3095.