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National Marine Fisheries Service biologist Jon Ambrose walks above the mouth of San Vicente Creek in Davenport on Jan 16.

Rebuilding population

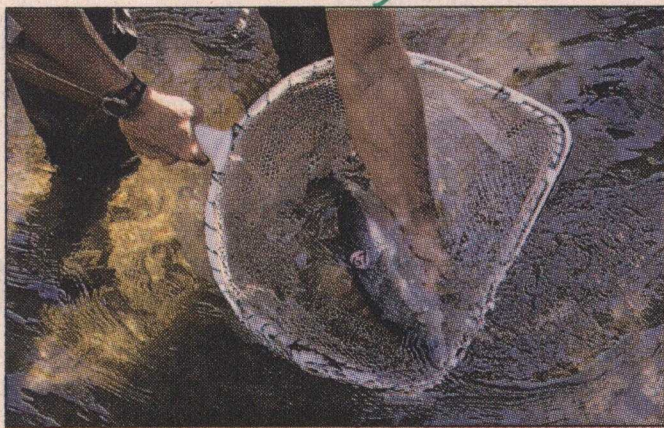
Fish & Fishing

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Endangered coho salmon released into tranquil stretch of San Vicente Creek

BY AARON KINNEY

Bay Area News Group



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Walter Heady, a freshwater ecologist, releases an adult female coho salmon into San Vicente Creek on Jan 16.

DAVENPORT — Walter Heady paused to admire a pink-bellied coho salmon as it slipped from his hands and glided toward a deep pool in San Vicente Creek.

"Wow, she is gorgeous," said Heady, a freshwater ecologist and researcher at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories on the shore of Monterey Bay.

On a sunny morning earlier this month, Heady helped two colleagues from the National Marine Fisheries Service take a simple but important step toward restoring the endangered fish to its historic habitat between the Golden Gate Bridge and Santa Cruz.

The men scooped 12 salmon from a tank in a pickup truck and car-

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COHO

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ried them one by one in nets to a tranquil stretch of the creek about a mile from the Pacific Ocean. On Tuesday biologists released eight more.

The spawning-age fish — 10 females and 10 males — have a singular mission in the month or so before they die: mate and produce nests of fertilized eggs.

BRINK OF EXTINCTION

This is just the second year a team led by the National Marine Fisheries Service has released adult salmon into San Vicente Creek, which empties into the sea through a tunnel under the scenic town of Davenport about 10 miles up state Highway 1 from Santa Cruz. Federal biologists say rebuilding the population here is essential to the survival of the coho in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties.

Now a popular sport fish, coho salmon were harvested by Native Americans who lived along the Pacific

Ocean before Western settlers arrived. Central California Coast coho, as the fish indigenous to this area are called, were once abundant from Mendocino to Monterey, but they are now on the brink of extinction.

"We haven't done this kind of scale of reintroduction in the Santa Cruz Mountains — we're kind of learning as we go and adapting as we learn," said Jon Ambrose, a biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service who last year co-authored an ambitious plan for Central Coast coho restoration. "The lessons we learn here we'll apply to all the Santa Cruz Mountain streams."

The salmon used in the restoration were raised a few miles north at a hatchery run by the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, a partner in the reintroduction along with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The hatchery sits on a tributary of Scott Creek, which thanks to the project's breeding program is the only stream south of Marin County with a viable coho population.