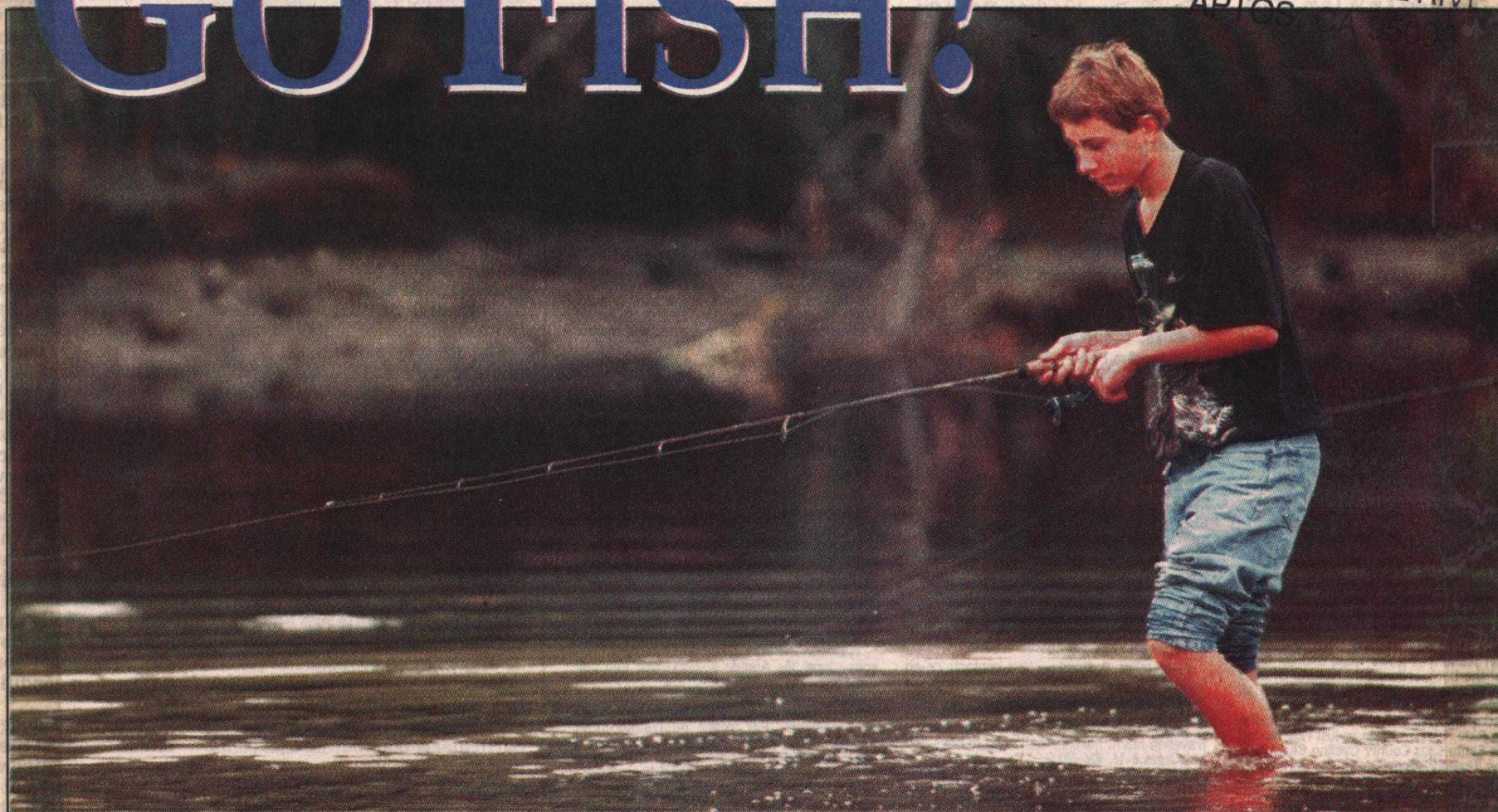


Animals

'Without the hatchery there would be no fishing for steelhead at all.'

GO FISH!

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

The ongoing efforts of the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project ensures steelhead fishing on local rivers and streams.

**With help from local hatchery, steelhead season opens
Monday with new hope for a threatened species**

By MIKE HALE
Sentinel staff writer

FOR THE PAST two decades, the steelhead trout has faced the fight of its life, and not one at the end of a fishing line.

Attacks from both man and Mother Nature — a relentless drought, water diversion, urbanization and burgeoning predators — have combined with other forces to nearly decimate a once-prevalent species.

Today, deemed “threatened” under protection by the Endangered Species Act and given an ongoing boost by the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, steelhead along the Central Coast appear poised to head upstream in encouraging numbers.

The Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project spawns and releases more than 60,000 steelhead into local waters

Fishermen, longtime allies for stream restoration and protection, help support the hatchery project in incredible numbers in large part to keep a tradition (along with the fish) from dying. Wolf said more than 1,600 local fishermen support the project in some way.

“Sport fishing is really big in this area. There is really a fanatical following,” Wolf said.

With a boost from recent rains that have opened several creeks, and with the influx of more than 60,000 hatchery-spawned steelhead released into local waters this year by the project, opening day should be a successful one.

“Last year was the worst ever,” said Ernie Kinzli of Ernie’s Casting Pond. “With the nice little rains we’ve been having, it will help the fish to scatter. If it wasn’t for the project, there would be a lot less fish.” And no fishing.

Monday, a celebration of sorts will take place on local streams with the opening of steelhead season. Hundreds of fishermen will gather in waders to enjoy their sport and herald the start of what is hoped to be a revival.

“There have been great strides in turning around declining fish populations,” said Larry Wolf, who handles fundraising for the non-profit organization in Davenport dedicated to restoring and enhancing native salmon and steelhead populations.

Fishermen, longtime allies



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Seth Baron, a volunteer at the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, stands near the rebuilt water diversion dam on Big Creek. The project has undergone renovation after last February’s storms devastated the site.

Four-pronged attack

The non-profit Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project works toward four main goals:

- 1) Raise approximately 60,000-75,000 steelhead each year to release into streams flowing into bay.
- 2) Raise as many silver salmon as they can successfully spawn for the restoration of fish in local streams.
- 3) Raise 120,000 king salmon each year in Monterey Harbor floating pens and release into bay to increase catchable king salmon for commercial and sport fishermen.
- 4) Supply as many as 115 classrooms (grades 1-9) throughout Northern California with live steelhead eggs as part of a hands-on educational field project.

“Without the hatchery there would be no fishing for steelhead at all in the Monterey Bay area,” said Wolf. “They would close fishing in this area.”

The San Lorenzo River has been a popular stream for steelhead fishing. In the 1960s, the annual run was estimated to be about 20,000. Some estimates last year put that figure at between 1,000 and 5,000.

Since its formation in 1976, the project has spawned, reared and released nearly 2 million Chinook and coho salmon and steelhead trout into the Central Coast streams and the Pacific Ocean.

In February of this year, the hatchery was devastated by severe winter storms. An estimated 60,000 steelhead trout were killed when water and power were knocked out at the project’s headquarters.

Through mostly private donations, the hatchery went back on line in April of this year.

“It was a tremendous recovery at the hatchery,” said Wolf, who noted that the project was able to update the facilities at the state-of-the-art fish hatchery, and update their techniques and standards.

The hatchery is currently the main coho restoration facility on the north coast and the only non-profit hatchery south of Russian River left in existence.

The project takes on many causes, including a widespread educational program in more than 110 schools, but this time of year the talk turns to sport fishing and how the hatchery keeps that possible.

Even with the hatchery, fishing for steelhead is allowed only under extreme restrictions. There is a catch-and-release policy everywhere but on the San Lorenzo River. On that waterway, fishermen may keep one fish, but only ones fin clipped, a mark signifying it’s a hatchery fish.

In addition, steelhead fishing is only allowed on Wednesdays, Saturdays, Sundays and legal holidays, and barbed hooks are prohibited.

Most of the fish caught should be hatchery fish. According to Kinzli, 60 percent of the fish hooked at his

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local contests come from the hatchery.

Even with the project's assistance, the life of a steelhead is still wrought with danger. Like salmon, steelhead migrate from streams to oceans and back. The young hatch in fresh water, where they grow and live for a year or more, and then swim to sea. They return to their birthplace to spawn in clean, silt-free gravel, then swim back to the

ocean until the next spawning season.

The drought in the 1980s dried up many of the local spawning beds and populations dwindled. Today, the biggest problem is predation from sea lion and harbor seals, who gather at the mouths of streams and prey on steelhead.

Wolf said recent students show 40 percent of all incoming fish into the San Lorenzo River and Scott Creek have scars from marine mammal

bites.

"In all reality steelhead are an abundant and resilient fish," Wolf said. "There are plenty of fish in the river, plenty of smolt. The main problem is predators. For all we do, we have no control over that."

Donations can be sent to the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, P.O. Box 417, Davenport, Calif., 95017. Prospective volunteers may call Al Smith at (408) 458-3095.