

RIVERS OF A LOST COAST

California rivers were once a mecca for fishermen

By Wallace Baine

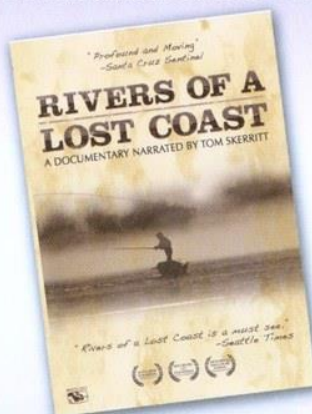
The luminous new documentary "Rivers of a Lost Coast" is not really about fishing. Granted, literally speaking, it is about fishing, specifically fly-fishing for salmon and steelhead on Northern California's mightiest rivers (including our own San Lorenzo River).

But on a deeper level, "Rivers" is about something else entirely, something far more profound and moving, even for people whose experience with fishing doesn't go much beyond playing Go Fish with the kids. It's about a golden age passing away. It's about the continuing legacy of humankind's ever-evolving relationship with nature. It's about lessons we never seem to learn. It's a Gold Rush story. It's a Paradise Lost story.

Filmmakers Justin Coupe and Palmer Taylor, UC Santa Cruz graduates, recently came back to Santa Cruz to screen "Rivers" at the Rio Theatre. Both men grew up fishing. "My dad is a really serious fisherman," said Coupe, who grew up fishing the mountain rivers of the Sierra Nevada with his father, hearing stories of the once-great salmon and steelhead runs on the coastal rivers, but not getting a chance to experience those rivers until he was 18.

But their film is aimed at a wider audience. It tells the story of what most fishermen know quite well anyway, how the fisheries of Northern California – once so robust as to seem inexhaustible – have been overfished to the point of extinction. Yet, the film also works as a fond look back at a burgeoning culture of fishermen that evolved around those rivers, a chronicle of those who experienced the greatness of those rivers before it all disappeared.

Narrated by the actor Tom Skerritt – who played the father in fly-fishing's greatest pop-culture artifact, the film "A River Runs Through It" – "Rivers of a Lost Coast" operates on both a macro and a micro level. The



"Rivers of a Lost Coast," a film by UC Santa Cruz graduates Justin Coupe and Palmer Taylor.

big-picture story focuses on four rivers – the San Lorenzo, the Russian in Sonoma County, the Eel in southern Humboldt and the Smith River, near the Oregon state line. Through old photos and film footage, and interviews with veteran fishermen of those rivers, it chronicles the astounding richness of the fish runs at the beginning of the 20th century, when the rivers were just being discovered

as magical playgrounds for fly-fishing. One fisherman talks about not being able to wade into the river without being knocked down by hundreds of fish. Another talks about seeing a three-foot wall of silver on the river and not realizing for a second or two that it was the backs of salmon moving resolutely upriver.

Soon, however, the number of fishermen in their waders and fly-rods began to rival the number of fish, and the film provides images of fishermen standing shoulder to shoulder casting into the dark water. The mouth of Santa Cruz's San Lorenzo was once a center of manic fishing activity.

But as the decline begins, "Rivers" becomes a heartbreaking metaphor for the diminishing greatness of California as a whole. It's a convincing encapsulation of the scenario that modern-day Californians know all too well – swelling populations, mindless exploitation of natural resources, rearguard actions to reverse course that come too late, memories and legends left in the wake.

Yet the film works on a smaller, human-scale level as well in its portrayal of a man who emerges as the film's central character. His name was Bill Schaadt, and he fished mostly on the Russian River. Schaadt, who died in 1995, embodied the obsessions of fly-fishermen of the era in an extreme way. His devotion to being on the river and catching fish engulfed him to the point that he eschewed the traditional markers of a life well-lived – family, career, money, a nice home – all in the name of fishing.

"Bill's life was a metaphor for what happened to the rivers," said Coupe who interviewed several anglers who knew Schaadt.

Photo: Rivers of the Lost Coast

Photo: Warren Haack

"He was right in the middle of the golden era, and kept on when many other people have moved on. When he died, the rivers were pretty much at the end of the line as well."

What makes "Rivers" stand out as a story of environmentalism is its interview subjects, men who in their own way loved communing with the natural world, but were not part of the environmental mainstream.

"These were guys who were generally speaking not into the environmental movement at all," said Coupe. "They just weren't concerned with that kind of stuff. They were older people, set in their ways like most people are. But ultimately it's really a sad story because you see these same people saying, 'We didn't act soon enough.' I think there was a lot of faith in state and federal agencies, Fish and Game, etc., in protecting it, but they now realize, 'No, we as anglers are the best stewards and spokespeople.'"

The film ends with a silent postscript that in 2008, the government shut down all fishing activities in California's salmon and steelhead fisheries, a sobering eulogy for a natural environment that went from thriving to dead in the space of 50 years. Coupe and Taylor give some time to talk of fishery restoration, but the thrust of the film is that the mighty runs are a thing of the past.

"I don't think the runs will ever be what



The mouth of Santa Cruz's San Lorenzo was once a center of manic fishing activity. (Designated a "catch and release" stream since 1984.)

they were in the 1920s and '30s," said Coupe, who pointed out that the disappearance of the fish on the rivers were due almost as much to irresponsible logging and water diversion as much as it was due to overfishing. "But they can be much better than they are now. And we know so much more about the fisheries than we did 30 years ago."

Taylor, who composed the stirring music for the documentary, said that the grand fishing of yesteryear can likely still be expe-

rienced in places like Alaska. "But the point is, that California used to be that place you traveled to for fishing. It wasn't Alaska. It was right here."

"You can go and find fish, if you have a mind to do it," said Coupe. "But you will never again find a place as pleasant to fish as these Northern California rivers were. The weather was mostly great. The rivers were so accessible, and easy to wade into. It was a paradise." ♣