

SWIMMING SPOT MAY CLOSE

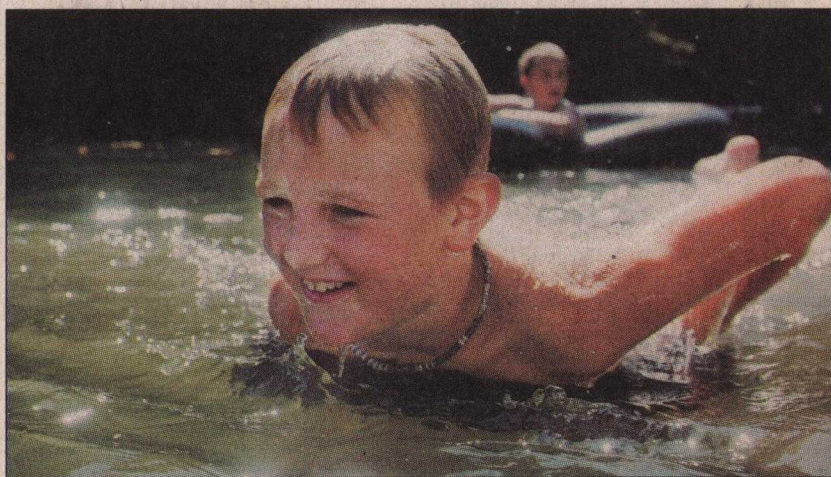
Dam to form popular pool
in Ben Lomond needs permit,
new study on steelhead trout
to open again, officials say

Ben Lomond

By David L. Beck
Mercury News

The old swimming hole, a piece of Americana that has inspired sentimental paintings and poetry for generations, is running afoul of modern times in the bucolic Santa Cruz Mountains town of Ben Lomond, where environmental laws are threatening an 80-year summer tradition.

A five-year state Fish and Game permit for the Ben Lomond Summer Dam runs out after this season. And it may not be renewed unless Santa Cruz County or some other organization can come up with as much as \$100,000 to study whether the dam is harming steelhead trout, a threatened species.



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Anthony Salvia, 7, plays in the San Lorenzo River at Ben Lomond's summer swimming hole. With no permit for a dam, such summer fun could dry up.

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Ben Lomond began putting in summer dams in the 1920s.

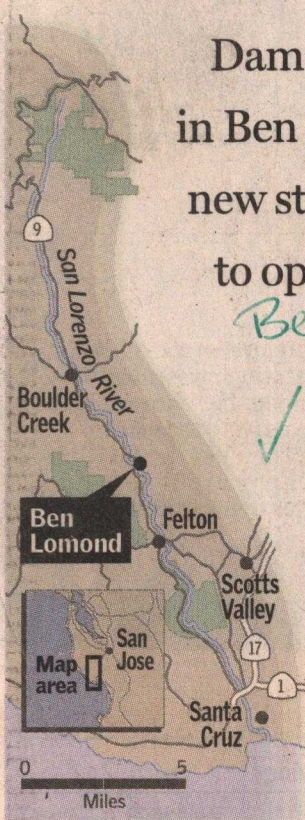
"It's a treasure up here," said regular Nora Hochman, 48, of Soquel, floating in an inner tube and picking moss off her arms.

"That green stuff is attacking my legs. It just gives you the willies," she

said happily, "like when you were a kid. Which is what I feel like when I come up here."

But state law and the federal Endangered Species Act may stand between families who have been coming

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Clare Parker, 11, tries to lounge as her brother, 8-year-old Ivan Parker, splashes around at the Ben Lomond swimming hole.

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for generations to swimming holes such as Ben Lomond's, and steelhead, which spawn in the river but live in the ocean.

Damming a river dries up the stream bed in the spring, when the swimming hole is filling, and floods it in September, when the dam is removed, wildlife officials say. In between, the impounded water warms to temperatures that force the fish to feed more, while at the same time reducing their potential food supply.

There may be as many as 23 dams up and down the San Lorenzo River at various times of the year. Ben Lomond's, with its history, is simply the most prominent.

"They're all threatened," said Jeff Almquist, the county supervisor through whose district the San Lorenzo flows. "Everyone has to get a permit, technically, though I imagine there are dams that never had a permit anyway and would just keep doing it until someone physically stops them."

Ben Lomond's current structure was built in 1946 along with a small creek-side park.

Each summer, boards are inserted into a metal frame, impeding the flow of the stream and creating a swimming hole. By this time of year, it's about 70 degrees — "somewhere between the ocean and a pool," says lifeguard Chris March — and the water's fine.

For humans, that is.

"Ah! It's amazing!" said Sheila Dunton,

30, a high school history teacher from Santa Cruz, floating contentedly Sunday in a big black inner tube while her husband, Brent, 37, tended the baby.

"You'd hope that there'd be some way to co-exist" for humans and steelhead, she said. The conflict, as she sees it, is between what's "detrimental to steelhead" and what's "detrimental to summer fun."

Santa Cruz County holds the permit and was prepared to do the environmental analysis, Almquist said.

But voters in March wiped out the county's utility tax, leading supervisors to cut money for the report from the budget.

Once, these permits were easy to get.

"You used to have a warden come out with his pretty-much-standard checklist," said Kevan Urquhart, a senior biologist with the U.S. Fish and Game's Monterey division. "He'd write it practically on the spot, and within a day or two" the official state permit would arrive.

Now, he said, "Every project has to do a study. It's not optional. It's not avoidable. It's not something that Fish and Game invented. It's state law."

Like Ben Lomond, Boulder Creek faces the loss of its permit, although the swimming hole there lacks the sentimental attachment Ben Lomond's holds. Boulder Creek has been damming the river for the past five years.

Boulder Creek Recreation and Park District director Barbara Day is uncertain whether the town can navigate the permit process in time for next year.

"It's been great to have it in, and we hope for the best," she said. "But it seems like it's a little complicated right now, for the future."

No fish could be seen Sunday at Ben Lomond's swimming hole. No surprise there, said local resident Ed Hill.

"My father and I lived here all our lives, and we've fished every inch of the stream," said Hill, 66. "There's never been any fish running up and down the river in the summer."

Federal and state officials say local officials shouldn't be surprised by the new requirements. They received warnings two years ago that the permit process had changed dramatically with the 1998 listing of steelhead as threatened.

Urquhart estimates the state permit process can be completed in less than a year.

Federal laws require approval of a habitat conservation plan, which may involve doing work elsewhere on the river to compensate for the problems created by the dam. Obtaining those approvals is "usually a two-year process, if everything works smoothly," said Jon Ambrose, a biologist for the National Marine Fisheries Service in Santa Rosa.

"They should've started this process some time ago," Ambrose said. "Lack of planning is not going to serve as an excuse, either."

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