

Steelhead living it up thanks to Swanton hatchery

By PAUL BEATTY

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The morning will be cold on the river bank, under redwoods wet from the night's fog.

Dark and damp, the forest resting in silent silhouette until it clears to a winter's dawn.

The fisherman slips out of bed quietly, dresses warmly, takes his number nine fly rod, tackle box with eight- and 10-pound test line, number four hooks, corkies, salmon eggs and nightcrawlers.

He'll get to San Lorenzo River early enough, by five, to get his spot before it's taken by some guy who thinks fishing is a reason to drink and party.

Only one of 200 guys with a flyrod is a good steelhead fisherman, his friends say.

They say he's one of the good ones. Born and tested to know what the fish will take when they're not feeding. Know where they're hiding, waiting in the pool, unseen, while fishermen trudge past telling him that spot's fished out.

A game of instinct. A patient game.

He casts his lure into the river's drift; a plastic salmon-egg that bobs beneath the surface; either of no interest to the silky shadow suspended there or irresistible in its seductive movement. Always, a question.

A waiting game. A patient game. An explosion!

A 12-pound steelhead takes the bait, racing the humming line as adrenaline floods the man's heart.

The great trout moves with the current, whips in crescent-leaps, turning the invisible line into a scalpel that slices toward the brush at the far bank.

He sets the line. An eight-pound

test that has to do the work of 40-pound line used by fishers at sea.

He must turn the quickened fish. Turn him instantly or lose him.

Instinctively the steelhead reverses, upstream to an overhanging branch to tear free of the pain in its throat that makes the man part of him.

An ancient struggle.

The fish breaks! Vibrantly, twisting and in a final leap is no longer his. The struggle is over in seconds.

The man curses, feeling a wave of disappointment.

Then he feels the purity of the moment.

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Chances are this year "the big one that got away" was hatched and reared in a large plastic pool in a canyon three miles east along Swanton Road.

About half the steelheads in San Lorenzo River today come from the more than 350,000 fish that live because of a vision held by a marine biologist and the work and money of local fishermen. Added to that is the support of Bud McCrary, one of the owners of Big Creek Lumber Company.

The idea that created the hatchery came from Dr. Tom Thompson, a marine advisor with the University of California.

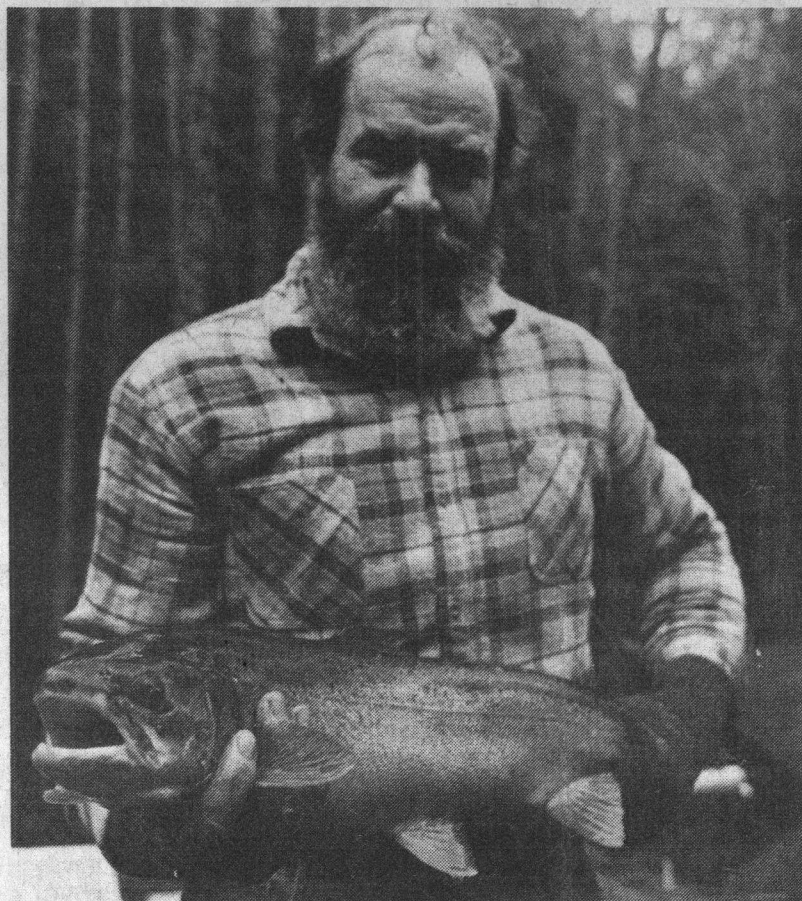
His idea in 1976 was to restock the feeder streams into Monterey Bay — San Lorenzo River, Pajaro River and their tributaries — with native steelhead and salmon.

The idea became the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project.

The steelhead project is a success in only three years of plantings.

The salmon project is in deep trouble.

One local fisherman who's come to be known as "the kingpin" of the



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Project biologist Dave Streig holds 3-year-old female steelhead.

project is Jack Harrell, a 42-year-old construction supervisor at Municipal Wharf and a native son of Santa Cruz.

He's enthusiastic — putting his money and hundreds of hours of free-labor into the hatchery — but he's deeply concerned about the problems of bringing salmon back.

"We need hens (female salmon) and the problem is finding them. We found two males two years ago,"

swimming above," Harrell says.

"More knowledgeable fishermen will return the natives they catch," Harrell says quietly.

The two men occasionally spend their lunch hour at the wharf office discussing the project.

"Jack is a legend," says Harris as his friend laughs depreciatingly. "He is. He's the kingpin of this pro-

ject. That's a fact. You never get enough credit, Jack."

McCrary also says Harrell and fisherman Don Hoga, a Santa Cruz mailman for 25 years, deserve public acknowledgement for their work over the past few years.

"The main reason I volunteer," says Harrell, "is because I'm a fisherman, although I don't do much of that anymore. The hatchery is rewarding. I get more out of it than I put in. Seeing the fish there. Seeing the magnificent fish return is a pleasurable experience. People who aren't fishermen have a hard time seeing that."

Harris is impressed by Harrell's fishing skill. "He's one of the best."

Harrell disclaims, "There are no masters when it comes to catching steelhead. No one catches their limit."

Both men feel that only one of 100, maybe one of 500, fishermen are experts. Too many are partiers. Too many drink too much.

Wharf superintendent Bill Eisele is impressed by Harrell's contribution. "He's put a lot of his money into it and a lot of time. He's a good fisherman but he doesn't like to eat fish. Offer him fish or steak and he'll go for the steak every time."

The two friends give credit to McCrary, their friend Hoga and the local clubs that support the project with money and work.

The project gets some money from state Fish and Game Department funds and it has a contributor list of about 200 local fishermen.

Harris wants a \$2 stamp added to fishing licenses to raise money for area restocking. He doesn't know if it's possible to get it through the bureaucracy.

Among the local support groups are the San Lorenzo River Steel-

headers, the Santa Cruz Rod and Gun Club and Santa Cruz Fly Fishermen.

When the hatchery project started five years ago, it took over the abandoned Fish and Game hatchery off Swanton Road. A hatchery building was constructed, ponds built, a diversion dam rebuilt and 2,300 feet of four-inch pipe laid. Big Creek Lumber contributed materials.

In their natural state — before homes and shopping complexes caused the spawning beds to silt over — the hen and buck would swim back into their fresh home-waters where she would begin the breeding process by scooping a shallow trench in the natural gravel that pre-dated man.

The buck excites the hen, encouraging her to swim over the incubator trench where she lays her eggs while the male swimming alongside sprays the birthing bed with a cloud of sperm. She covers the eggs while he hovers nearby.

The romance is gone in the hatchery. Biologist Streig milks the eggs and sperm from the fish and does the fertilizing. The eggs, incubated in the proper water, hatch and fish emerge as "alevin," tiny fish with a small egg-sac attached to their bellies to keep them fed for a couple weeks.

Fisherman Hoga has given a lot of his time to the project.

"I didn't catch many fish last year, I spent so much time at the hatchery. But it is satisfying, more satisfying (than catching one) to see someone catch a hatchery fish."

He's fished all during his life, pursued the steelhead here since 1950, soon after he moved from Michigan.

"Steelhead is an exciting fish. At a younger age, even seeing the fish, I'd get the shakes.

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“We need hens (female salmon) and the problem is finding them. We found two males two years ago, two males this year and no females. If we don't find females next year, we're in trouble.”

In 1984, 20,000 young coho salmon from the Fort Bragg area were planted locally, but only about 50 have returned to San Lorenzo River. “We're wondering why we don't see more,” Harrell says.

Another 20,000 salmon from Fort Bragg will be planted in March and Harrell hopes the project can get a permit to take 10 females from Scott Creek next year, one of the few streams with any breeding stock left.

Heading the project is Dick Wehner and its biologist is Dave Streig, a student and disciple of Thompson. Streig is the only paid worker at the hatchery and he is deeply concerned about the need for a stock of breeding salmon. He must have species from native streams for they are most adaptable to the changed conditions of local waterways.

Salmon return but once to their hometown streams while steelhead can come home three or four times, and one sensuous “hen” may have made it six times.

In a confusion of generic nicknames, fishermen call the male fish “bucks.”

The hatchery has improved on nature in one way.

Harrell says, “We can feed the steelhead enough — more than they get in nature — so they only need one year in the ocean before returning.”

Native species, with rare exception, need two years in deep water before they come back to start their families.

Harrell and his friend, Pete Harris, a 42-year-old contractor who is also a native son of Santa Cruz, say local fishermen are more apt to throw back a native steelhead than a hatchery fish.

Hatchery fish can be identified by either a clipped fin, or a dorsal fin that is worn down from the crowded conditions of the hatchery. “The fin gets worn down on the bellies of fish