

Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition: A Community Effort to Care for Carpinteria Creek

By Bob Thiel and Darcy Aston, CCWC members

Some days it's really tough not to be cynical. The world is complicated and things move fast, so it's hard to feel like we can influence the things we care about. But here in the Carpinteria Valley, we've proved that wrong again and again. Santa Claus is gone but his name isn't, the bluffs are a protected open space, and Carpinteria Salt Marsh has been greatly restored. Margaret Mead, an American anthropologist, pointed out that "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition is one of those small groups now working to make Carpinteria Valley a better place.

The Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition (CCWC) was born in 2001, when a partnership of local landowners, community groups, resource agencies, and individuals joined together to restore and protect the resources of the creek. Inspired by a shared sense of responsibility to our community, we're working together to create conditions that will allow healthy steelhead stocks to recover in the creek.

For many of us, our family experiences with the creek go back generations----not only to secret places we explored as children, but also to the days when the creek ran thick with steelhead. We know that farm and ranch families, urban residents, and other neighbors in the area take pride in their deep personal relationship with the land and their intimate knowledge of the landscape. Many would like to help implement methods to improve the creek but seldom have the time or money to do so.

The Coalition hopes to offer ideas and attract the technical and financial help that will encourage people along the creek to join in caring for the creek. It's entirely a voluntary, grassroots effort. And it will be the landowners and other people who live in the watershed who will help define the problems and solutions for that effort.

What has happened to the steelhead?

Fifty years ago, Carpinteria Creek was home to plentiful runs of steelhead trout, which migrated each spring to spawning and feeding habitat in the upper watershed. But over the years, barriers to fish passage, degraded water quality, loss of stream habitat, and other problems have reduced steelhead to occasional visitors. The number of spawning fish in the Creek and other streams in our area has declined to a small fraction of historic levels, and it continues to fall. Today Southern California steelhead is an endangered species. When the local paper features a picture of one illegally pulled from Carpinteria Creek, we realize the magnitude of what we've lost.

What's so important about Carpinteria Creek?

Despite its problems, Carpinteria Creek offers great potential for steelhead recovery. Thirty years ago, the City of Carpinteria refused to allow the creek to be channelized with concrete for flood control. Now, unlike many other South Coast streams, its channel still runs freely under open spans (rather than through culverts) at both the Union Pacific tracks and the 101 freeway. The upper reaches of the creek contain great fish habitat, and water flows year round through the urban reach of the creek. Along much of the creek, there's a tall tree canopy that maintains the cool water that steelhead require. Because of these features, Carpinteria Creek may offer the best opportunity among all the urban streams in southern Santa Barbara County for restoring significant steelhead runs in the next few years.

What can be done to bring steelhead back?

Like salmon, steelhead are anadromous fish: They are born and reared in freshwater, move to the ocean to grow and mature, and return to freshwater to reproduce. Because of their migratory habits, steelhead are more sensitive to certain conditions in a creek than resident fish. Barriers such as dams or road crossings, removal of native vegetation, and siltation in the creek all affect steelhead survival.

Restoring significant steelhead runs will require a comprehensive approach to the problems that affect the Creek. So far, the CCWC has received almost \$600,000 in grants and other funding to accomplish this. Some of our current efforts include:

Watershed Assessment: Working closely with landowners, a consultant is documenting the resources of the watershed, and identifying areas where restoration efforts would be beneficial. This assessment, which is funded by grants from the Department of Fish and Game, will provide baseline data for specific projects and be useful in attracting grant funding.

Steelhead barrier removal: The CCWC has identified two sites with significant steelhead barriers. We're working cooperatively with the landowners to remove these barriers, stabilize adjacent creek banks, and restore native vegetation. These efforts are covered by grants from the Coastal Impact Assistance Program, NOAA Fisheries, the California Coastal Conservancy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Community Outreach: The coalition received a grant from the Coastal Resource Enhancement Fund to educate the community about our effort, and to encourage participation. We're setting up a web site, creating exhibits and brochures, and developing fact sheets and a creek care guide. Check this column in the future for information about how to access those resources.

Restoration Opportunities: In addition, the Wendy P. McCaw Foundation provided funding for the CCWC to work with landowners along the creek to identify and prepare conceptual plans for modification or removal of additional steelhead migration barriers.

What you can do to help

It takes a community to create a healthy watershed. And Carpinteria Creek deserves the very best of us all. The people of Carpinteria Valley share a strong sense of environmental stewardship. We've proven our ability to make things happen by our efforts to restore Carpinteria Salt Marsh and to preserve the Carpinteria Bluffs. By working together to achieve local solutions, we can also help bring back the steelhead to Carpinteria Creek.

We invite you to participate in our efforts. You can help restore the creek---and protect the investment in your land---by participating in a community effort to care for the creek.

We'll keep you informed as the work of the Coalition progresses, but if you'd like to attend one of our meetings or learn more about what we hope to do, please call or email Matt Roberts at 805-684-5405, extension 449, or matr@silcom.com.