



Jeff Bright photo

Wild Steelhead Need More Advocates

by Jack W. Berryman

West Coast wild steelhead populations are disappearing at an alarming rate and if more advocates do not join the fight to save them, they will surely be gone forever. This advocacy must come from those who care most about these magnificent fish. To know them is to love them! And, for the most part, the largest and most knowledgeable potential advocacy group is steelhead anglers.

Recently, the award winning documentary film, “Rivers of a Lost Coast,” brilliantly showed the demise of California’s fabled steelhead populations in the Eel, Russian, Sacramento, Garcia, and numerous others by the 1970’s. Floods, dams, poor logging practices, over fishing, and a reliance on hatchery fish, put wild steelhead populations in a death spiral that could not be overcome. By the early 2000’s, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) divided West Coast wild steelhead populations into 15 Evolutionary Significant Units (ESU’s) and later listed 11 of those ESU’s as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In Washington State, 4 out of 7 ESU’s were ESA listed and a 5th, Puget Sound, was added in 2007. Similar disastrous trends are being seen on British Columbia’s “crown jewel” Skeena watershed and its legendary tributaries like the Morice, Sustut, Kispiox, Bulkley, and Babine, among others. And, just this year, Washington’s spectacular Skagit/Sauk



Rich Simms photo

watershed was closed due to a major decline of wild steelhead. The mighty Hoh failed to reach escapement goals of wild fish in 4 of the last 7 years and the IHN virus has hit hatcheries on the Bogachiel, the Ouinault, and the Sol Duc (Snider Creek) wild brood stock facility.

Lessons need to be learned and learned fast. Steelhead need habitat and a recent study of wild steelhead populations in Washington estimated that 83% of their productive spawning and rearing habitat has been lost. We need to protect and recover as much damaged habitat as possible by protecting wider corridors along rivers, speaking out for dam and diversion removal, objecting to water withdrawals and streamside logging, and arguing for sound construction and agricultural practices. The best way to do this is to get involved in your local community and join and support groups like American Rivers, Cascade Land Conservancy, Columbia Land Trust, Pacific Rivers Council, Western Rivers Conservancy, Hoh River Trust, Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, or similar groups. National Parks, Wilderness Lands, Wild and Scenic Rivers and Salmon Strongholds should also be supported and petitioned for.

Wild steelhead have also been mismanaged by both state and tribal share holders and as Richard Burge, Vice President of Conservation for the Wild Steelhead Coalition (WSC) recently wrote, “managing for Maximum Sustaining Yields should be abandoned as a 1950’s experiment that has failed wild stock and fisheries and has been in part responsible for wild fish declines and listings.” To recover and build wild steelhead to healthy populations, fish managers must focus on the key Viable Salmonid Population (VPS) parameters of abundance, diversity, productivity, and distribution with a goal of reaching known parameters from the past. Ignoring historical parameters will only ensure that goals will be set too low. Hatcheries and hatchery fish must be constantly

monitored and controlled since it has now been scientifically proven that they reduce the adaptation of wild fish to specific rivers, lower wild fish production, impose ecological impacts like competition, and encourage harvest fisheries that take and harm wild fish. All rainbow trout (the resident form of wild steelhead) and steelhead smolt fisheries in anadromous steelhead rivers should be stopped and all wild brood stock recovery hatcheries should be either studied for impacts on productivity and diversity or terminated. Finally, fish managers should insist that no wild steelhead should ever be killed by sport anglers, impose strict catch and release rules wherever wild steelhead are present, and be certain that management plans are completed and signed by the comanager before fishing begins. These plans with tribal managers must ensure that the unused portion of the 50% sport allocation is allowed to spawn.

Since its founding in 2000, the WSC has become a thriving, science based, politically effective organization that has earned the respect of fish managers and anglers alike. It has become the leading advocacy group for wild steelhead, but has also joined other like-minded groups for further advocacy

through its Steelhead Summit Alliance (SSA) begun in 2002. Under the leadership of the WSC's Marianne Mitchell, the SSA and the WSC have worked closely with the Wild Fish Conservancy, Washington Council of Trout Unlimited, Steelhead Committee of the Federation of Fly Fishers, Wild Salmon Center, Native Fish Society, Long Live the Kings, and several other notable groups, to further advocate for wild steelhead. Every steelhead fisherman should join one or more of these groups and start volunteering both time and financial support for the fish.

Advocacy does work and several recent developments that benefit wild steelhead are the result. Wild steelhead kill limits have plummeted or disappeared in many rivers due to angler demands, hatcheries are being reformed, and catch methods have been altered to protect wild fish. Several Northwest restaurants have stopped serving wild steelhead and a front page Seattle Times article, "Lure of Steelhead," authored by environmental writer Lynda V. Mapes and initiated by the WSC, explained the uniqueness of wild steelhead and their plight. Longtime wild steelhead advocate Bill McMillan was awarded a \$15,000 grant by Patagonia and the WSC to determine the historical abundance of wild steelhead in the Columbia River watershed. And, even more recently, the owner of the Seattle's famed Pike Place Fish Market decided to stop selling wild steelhead because of "a barrage of angry e-mails organized by steelhead sport anglers." Yes, we can make a difference and there is much more to be accomplished. Get involved and become a wild steelhead advocate today!

Jack W. Berryman is past president of the Wild Steelhead Coalition and author of the award-winning book, Fly-Fishing Pioneers & Legends of the Northwest. He resides in Kirkland, WA. A shorter version of this article was published in the September/October, 2010 issue of Northwest Fly Fishing and we thank the publisher for permission to reprint www.matchthehatch.com



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