

Restore the steelhead

There was a time when streams throughout California — including here in Santa Barbara County — were home to prolific runs of steelhead trout. If the faded photographs are to be believed, a skillful (or lucky) fisherman could catch a bountiful number of the ocean-going fish in the Santa Ynez River during their annual runs.

Today, the populations of steelhead have themselves faded nearly away, both locally and throughout much of the West. Their plight has prompted the federal government to propose listing the steelhead as an endangered species. This designation would be aimed at restoring the annual runs, which once ranged up to 25,000 fish in the Santa Ynez River.

Steelhead trout start their lives in fresh-water streams, then migrate to the Pacific Ocean. Those that survive their odyssey at sea make a remarkable trek back to their home waters to spawn. The fish's decline locally began after construction of Lake Cachuma's Bradbury Dam in the 1950s. Last year biologists were able to find only a few dozen steelhead in the river.

We support taking steps to bring the steelhead back from the brink of extinction in the belief that the value of the effort transcends this particular fish. When a species is struggling

for survival it often is a signal of a much greater threat to our natural world that should not be ignored.

That said, we are mindful that there can be real costs to the community in attempting to preserve an endangered species. In the case of the concerns involves our public and private water supplies. Water purveyors and others fear that attempts to save the fish will overtax both our natural and financial resources.

But we believe that solutions can be found that will help bring back the steelhead without creating an undue hardship on the community, and would urge those involved to seek out such approaches. We think this is particularly true given that a new, supplemental water source will soon be pouring into our county, in the form of the State Water Project.

While State Water has been criticized in some quarters of our community as an expensive and unnecessary boondoggle, we view it as a needed and important component of our overall water supply. State Water is neither cheap nor a panacea for all our water needs, and it must be used wisely. But we take comfort in knowing that State Water may contribute to the return of healthy steelhead populations to our local waters, and to the overall health of our local environment.