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# Activists go up creek for steelhead

The Environmental Defense Center's first ever Mission Creek Trout Count and Creek Walk on Aug. 7 was a whopping success. Taking a break from Fiesta activities, more than 60 people arrived at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History to rock hop up Mission and Rattlesnake Canyon creeks and catch a glimpse of elusive and endangered steelhead trout gliding through shady pools.

**Brian Trautwein**

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Twelve nonprofit organizations co-sponsored EDC's event, and everybody — from toddlers to seniors — was excited about the prospect of seeing steelhead. For many, it would be their first sighting ever. Their high level of interest and excitement reflects the strong community support for protecting and restoring steelhead habitat in Mission Creek. The trout count is a component of EDC's Mission Creek Steelhead Recovery Project, supported by the Wendy P. McCaw Foundation. Since Mission Creek is the city of Santa Barbara's largest and most visible waterway, and one of few that still supports steelhead in southern California, it represents an excellent opportunity to teach people about the plight of steelhead and the obstacles to restoring healthy streams, specifically water pollution, concrete channels, and dams.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of this community's decision to reject the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' proposal to chan-

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# Stream restoration projects will help save steelhead trout

## TRAUTWEIN

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nelize the remaining 1.2 miles of Lower Mission Creek. Instead of paving the creek, a community stake-holding group designed and recommended a more natural project that would preserve the natural stream corridor through the city, while protecting people from flooding during storms.

We have come a long way since the Corps was poised to turn Mission Creek into a cement-filled Los Angeles-style "river." Now, city Public Works engineers, the county Flood Control District and trout count organizers are working toward restoring the creek's natural resources without sacrificing flood protection. During the trout count, 10 local

creek experts led groups on educational walks to discuss habitat restoration and steelhead recovery issues. Participants learned how adequate setbacks between creek banks and adjacent development will reduce polluted runoff, minimize flooding, and maintain healthy fish and wildlife habitat. They also were able to see first-hand how culverts and dams block steelhead migration to foothill spawning habitats.

Some witnessed water being released into the creek to keep steelhead alive during this dry summer when wells and water projects tap into the stream's low flows. Others found non-native blue gill — a type of sunfish apparently released into the creek by neighbors — that can adversely affect the native steelhead. EDC officials and biologists spoke enthusiastically about local creek restoration projects and how Santa

Barbara can recover a healthy steelhead population by modifying dams, culverts and channels so fish can swim upstream to their ancestral spawning beds in the Los Padres National Forest.

By far, the biggest problems facing migrating steelhead are the two concrete channels that contain Mission Creek on the west side of Highway 101 near Carrillo Street. Their flat bottoms and length — almost a mile — make it nearly impossible for even the fastest, strongest steelhead to reach the spawning habitat upstream.

The News-Press highlighted the plight of steelhead in a March 15, 2000, story titled "Rare Parr." A male and female steelhead — each more than 20 inches long — entered the creek in an attempt to reach the headwaters and spawn. When they became trapped, immediately below

the concrete channels, they attempted to spawn there — unsuccessfully. Eventually, the water coming through the unshaded concrete channel became increasingly warm, the exhausted female grew too weak to swim, and she ultimately had to be transported by state and federal biologists to a less polluted creek. Unfortunately, because she could not navigate the concrete channel in Mission Creek to the deep shady spawning pools in the Santa Barbara foothills, that fish failed to reproduce and died shortly after relocation.

This tragedy must not be repeated. Santa Barbara is blessed by many things — a beautiful ocean, an unbeatable climate, distinctive mountains, gorgeous sunsets and steelhead in Mission Creek. This remarkable species of salmon is highly adapted to southern California's drought patterns and — by rely-

ing more on its freshwater form as a rainbow trout — has managed to persist despite the droughts and, to a limited extent, even despite the dams and concrete channels. Southern California steelhead still are attempting to complete their lifecycle by returning from the ocean to spawn in Santa Barbara's creeks. The least we can do as stewards of our natural resources is to allow these miraculous fish to return home, back to the deep mountain pools that await their return.

When the last teams made it back from the Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens, Rattlesnake Canyon and Rocky Nook Park, we tallied up the trout count. Our volunteers recorded 119 steelhead trout on one hot afternoon. While it is wonderful to confirm that we still have steelhead, the population throughout Southern California has been reduced by 99 percent during the last century. The Mission Creek population should be much larger, and EDC believes it will be once the fish have the opportunity to return to their native spawning pools.

In 1994, when the community rejected the Corps' "LA River" proposal for Mission Creek, it showed that Santa Barbarans understand that the natural environment is central to their quality of life. Similarly, the trout count demonstrated the growing community support for stream restoration projects that will help bring back the once-thriving steelhead populations, reduce pollution and improve our environment in Santa Barbara. After walking Mission Creek, the volunteers have become trout ambassadors and will carry the message that the fate of this species is in our hands.