



Russian River Watershed Association

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707)833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

RRWA October Environmental Column

Note to Anglers this Fall:

If Mouth Has Black, Put It Back

On September 25, a Sonoma County Water Agency video camera captured an image of the season's first Chinook salmon migrating upstream to spawn. These beautiful, powerful fish (also known as King salmon) annually return to the Russian River in numbers in the low thousands. Sadly, while Chinook are doing OK in the Russian River, their numbers are diminished in other areas and the fish are now "threatened" on the Endangered Species List. That's not all. Coho (or silver) salmon, are endangered, and steelhead are threatened.

The Russian River – once a famous spot for anglers – is now ruled by strict fishing regulations intended to protect the species while providing limited sport fishing opportunities. In essence, the rules allow hatchery-raised steelhead to be caught and killed, while wild steelhead, coho and Chinook must be returned to the water.

Because hatchery steelhead strongly resemble coho and Chinook, in past years steelhead anglers have accidentally kept the threatened or endangered fish. While anglers can pay heavy fines even if they even accidentally keep a coho or Chinook, nature pays a heavy fine, too. There are only a handful of coho left in the Russian River. Every spawning salmon that's lost to a fisherman's mistake can have a dramatic impact on the population. To prevent these mistakes from happening, in 2009 several agencies launched the "If Mouth Has Black, Put It Back" education program.

Mouth color is a clear and easy way to distinguish between steelhead and coho or Chinook. Steelhead have white or gray mouths, while coho and Chinook always have black markings in their mouth.

It used to be true that hatchery steelhead (which can be kept) could be distinguished from wild fish by a clipped adipose fin. *It's still true that fish with intact adipose fins should be returned to the wild (whether coho, steelhead or Chinook). But it's no longer true that ALL fish with clipped adipose fins can be kept.* Today, coho raised in the Russian River Coho Broodstock Program (at the Don Clausen Fish Hatchery at Lake Sonoma) have clipped adipose fins to help researchers easily identify program fish. Unlike hatchery steelhead – which are raised partially to provide sportfishing opportunities – the broodstock program coho are raised to prevent the species from slipping into extinction and must be returned to the water if caught.

Each fish from this unique program that returns to its spawning grounds provides one more small opportunity for the species to survive. Last spring, more than 200 adult coho were counted in the Russian River and its tributaries – a tenfold increase over prior years. In addition,



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many young coho have been counted in creeks and streams this summer, giving hope for the future.

Because of the confusion over adipose fins, several agencies worked together to agree on a common, simple identifier – mouth color. The “If Mouth Has Black, Put It Back” education campaign was created by the Coho Salmon Recovery Partners, which includes Trout Unlimited California, National Marine Fisheries Service, California Department of Fish and Game, Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, Sea Grant California, US Army Corps of Engineers, University of California Cooperative Extension and the Sonoma County Water Agency. The campaign was partly funded by a grant from the Sonoma County Fish & Wildlife Commission.

Signs are posted at more than three dozen popular Russian River access spots, including seven regional parks. Please fish responsibly!

This article was authored by Ann DuBay of the Sonoma County Water Agency. RRWA is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration and watershed enhancement.