

Opinion

Opinion: Guadalupe River salmon are at a perilous crossroads



(Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

A swollen Guadalupe River flows under the Coleman Avenue overpass in January, 2017. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

By **STEVE HOLMES** |

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The story begins on the Virginia Street Bridge at the art relief panels showcasing these amazing fish with the Guadalupe River flowing peacefully below. Schools taught us of the extinction of once prolific species like the Passenger pigeon once so abundant that their numbers blocked out the sun, now gone.

In 1986, a study of the proposed Downtown Flood Control Project identified 262 chinook redds in the Virginia Street section. A redd is the nest created by the female salmon using her tail to build a pile of gravel. She then lays her eggs, which are fertilized by the male salmon. When you extrapolate the study's redd numbers to include the upstream stretches of the Guadalupe River and its tributaries, one can safely estimate several thousand chinook called this river home. In contrast, South Bay Clean Creeks Coalition's informal survey of the Guadalupe Watershed during the 2016 chinook run showed numbers below 80 fish. How did we get here?

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The efforts of the lead agency, the Santa Clara Valley Water District, can only be described as a reluctant partner with past actions proving to be less than supportive.

In the 1990s, water flow was turned off along Los Gatos Creek resulting in the loss of offspring from an estimated 100 redds. In a position paper drafted by their fisheries biologist there is an attempt to rewrite the history of our chinook with false claims that chinook only entered the Guadalupe Watershed after water releases attracted stray chinook into the river in the 1970s. News stories dating as far back as Feb. 22, 1904, in the San Jose Daily Mercury, confirm the presence of salmon.

They are also of the opinion that these fish are non-native "hatchery strays" originating from Central Valley hatcheries, a position they use to justify inaction on their part. For 18 years, SCVWD has been stalled in negotiations of a comprehensive fisheries program delaying a majority of activities and projects that would have benefited our streams. In the absence of

agreed to guidelines mandated by governing bodies, flow rates necessary for fish passage are currently maintained below minimum rates, essentially blocking these fish from reaching better habitat in previously mitigated areas like Guadalupe Creek.

As local efforts have stalled, projects in the North Bay along Solano County's Putah Creek where "hatchery strays" chinook populations have rebounded from the tens to last year's fall chinook run in the thousands with similar successes occurring along the Russian River. Their approach runs counter to SCVWD's position that these fish are somehow not worthy of sharing our local waterways.

A straying chinook salmon is a natural function of these fish, so trying to diminish their status based on this attribute is absurd. Is their resistance more a function of possibly being required to do more work in support of a natural resource?

The stark lack of projects when compared to peer agencies cannot be overstated, all having a common denominator of support beyond a single agency.

It is time for our community to come together with all stakeholders present at the table. A global adoption will be necessary including corporations, local foundations, wealthy donors, universities, and county and city government to turn this fixable situation around. The public should have a say in whether these fish are given a chance to coexist in our Guadalupe Watershed. Or we face the very real possibility that our only link to this once bountiful resource will be the art images adorning our bridges and trails.

Steve Holmes is the founder and executive director of the South Bay Clean Creeks Coalition. He wrote this for The Mercury News.



Steve Holmes

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