



An Open Letter to the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers on the Occasion of the Organization's 30th Anniversary

Some years ago, an article in one of the fly-fishing magazines celebrated the recovery of native winter-run steelhead populations in Northern California's Eel River, reporting that escapement had reached some 1,500 fish—certainly a recovery of some modest measure over the latter decades of the 20th century.

Yet, while any ground gained is worthy of appreciation and recognition, I was saddened that the story fell into the quagmire of the shifting baseline phenomenon.

The Eel River, you see, is essentially the founding fishery of the codified pursuit of fly fishing for steelhead. When the noted San Francisco fly dresser John S. Benn began making arduous autumn journeys north to the remote Eel River in the 1880s, steelhead were still enigmatic—in fact they were not then called steelhead. Anglers realized these then-abundant fish seemed to be trout, yet they migrated to and from saltwater like salmon. So, in those days before steelhead had been scrutinized by science, anglers used the eminently logical moniker “salmon-trout” to describe a fish that would eagerly take flies.

In those halcyon days, the Eel River had an annual escapement of an estimated 150,000 steelhead, comprising both summer- and winter-run life-history populations. Today, Eel River summer-run steelhead—not even mentioned in that report about a modest recovery of winter steelhead—hover on the verge of extinction and the population of winter-run steelhead remains perilously low: 1,500 fish compared to 150,000 should be a dire warning more-so than a celebration.

A shifting baseline obscures the full story, and we must guard against it. We must be stewards of the history of our sport so that we can provide an accurate recounting of the facts when they matter most—in the fight to save and protect wild fish and their waters and the intact ecosystems they need.

The ability to reach back into time to truly understand the magnitude of what we have lost helps us appraise the urgency of our conservation ethos and priorities.

That's why the 30th anniversary of this club tonight should be a multilayered celebration—we can take great joy in the fact that the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers, formed in 1993, has ushered so many new fly anglers into the fold through the unwavering enthusiasm of its many board members and officers who have served over these past three decades and of its membership in general. Many of you

may not know that I was chosen to be the first-ever speaker for the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers at the club's inaugural meeting. I was deeply honored to have been so chosen and was happily surprised at the dedication and enthusiasm that seemed like an aura surrounding the founding officers and members that night so long ago. At the same time, we should also celebrate what 30 years means in terms of continuity. Those three decades past, and the years to follow, when imbued with the wisdom of so many amazing men and women who have kept this club alive and thriving, give us a long view rather than the snapshot views that tend to creep into discussions about critical conservation imperatives.

I have been back to speak to the membership on numerous occasions over the years, and have always found great joy in the fact that, with the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers, one moment I might be conversing with a member who has been fly fishing for 60 years and the next moment chatting with a wide-eyed newcomer to the sport who is being guided along by the generous members of the club. Along the way I've met many new friends, some no longer with us, and many who are still active members and officers.

Yet today, fly angling clubs need to fulfill more than one mission. Those like the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers who do such an admirable job of welcoming newcomers to the sport can serve as role models for new clubs, or for existing clubs that might wish to evolve into a better vehicle to serve people who want to learn more about fly fishing. At the same time, however, fly fishing clubs are, in my opinion, virtually dutybound to become increasingly active in the conservation arena.

Wild salmonids face perilous times. In recent years I've had to examine my own ethics and ask myself some soul-searching questions, chief among them being this: should I still be fishing for steelhead and should I still be fishing for native trout in tiny desert streams in southeast Oregon? In the face of increasingly imperiled native stocks, does the good of the fish outweigh my passion for fishing for them and catching them? But I also realize that we very likely confront an existential question: if we no longer pursue the native salmonids that have long endeared us to this sport and the places it takes us, who will remain to be advocates in the future? Who will fight for wild fish and their ecosystems? Who will be out there to care? Who will be our heroes?

The existential battle is indeed at hand. We must protect and recover native species and their habitats before we reach the point that our favorite places can no longer support sport fisheries.

This may sound like a call to activism, and in essence it is. But that does not mean that we all need to be the people on the ground, boots in the mud, so to speak, or the people lobbying politicians. Activism and advocacy take many forms and avoiding precipitous declines in wild fish populations (remember those lessons from the Eel River) requires all forms. As a journalist and especially as a magazine editor, I am dutybound to provide a venue for disseminating information about critical conservation undertakings, successes, and calls for action; as an individual you can be an important advocate by supporting the work of groups like Trout Unlimited, Western Rivers Conservancy, and many others; as a club, the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers can be a leader in advocating and action. This club has the power of so many terrific fly anglers at its disposal, and that brain-trust, along with the enthusiasm that brings even the newest anglers into the fold, creates a virtual army of change.

As the years accrue, look back often on the club's history, cater energetically to new fly anglers, work diligently at identifying critical conservation efforts in which the club can lend support, teach fly

angling ethics so that, to paraphrase Roderick Haig-Brown, newcomers can understand what makes our sport and why.

Through it all, embrace and foster those characteristics I have always admired so much in the Southern Oregon Fly Fishers: infectious enthusiasm and profound generosity.

--John Shewey, December 16, 2023