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Ventura River steelheaders (left to right) Don Rowe, Joe Hooker and Victor Peirano with winter steelhead taken near Tico Crossing (Hwy. 150) in 1920. At that time the Ventura offered excellent fishing.

Recapturing a steelhead stream:

The Ventura River

By MARK CAPELLI

EDITOR'S NOTE: Recently I heard that there was an effort underway to re-establish runs of steelhead in the Ventura River, only 40 miles north of Los Angeles. I contacted Mark Capelli, a member of the Ventura County Fish and Game Commission, and asked him to write the following story. The story is remarkable, for it documents the steady environmental decline of a once healthy steelhead stream and what is now being done to bring it back. I have just learned that a group "Friends of the Ventura River" has been formed to work toward that goal. Funds are needed for printing, telephone calls, etc. If after reading the following article you would like to donate to this worthy cause write: Friends of the Ventura, 63 South Olive St., San Buenaventura, Ca. 93001

CALIFORNIA STEELHEAD FISHERMEN normally associate sea-run rainbows with the great river systems of the north coast. Few would consider angling for steelhead in waters south of San Luis Creek, San Luis Obispo County. Yet steelhead once ranged far down the coast and provided southern California anglers with winter steelheading well into the present century.

Three rivers in particular offered excellent steelheading in southern California: the Santa Ynez in Santa Barbara County, and the Santa Clara and Ventura in Ventura County. There were numerous smaller streams running as far down as the Mexican border which enabled local anglers to escape from the crowd, but these three rivers provided the most consistent southland steelheading.

Today, dams, diversions, flood control projects and pollution generated by southern California's burgeoning population have decimated steelhead populations in most of these streams. A recent survey by the California Department of Fish and Game suggests that the Ventura River, about eighty miles north of Los Angeles, is probably the southernmost stream in California which still supports a steelhead run, though the number of fish presently migrating up the

Ventura River hardly constitutes a viable steelhead fishery. This situation could change, however, if current efforts to rehabilitate the Ventura runs are successful.

II

The Ventura River is typical of the many short-run coastal streams of California. Beginning in the transverse range, its headwaters flow for about sixteen miles through steep, rugged chaparral country before turning into a broad, flat valley and running another sixteen miles to the Pacific Ocean. Like nearly all California coastal streams, the Ventura River forms a brackish lagoon at its mouth which is subject to tidal action when not closed by a sandbar during the summer months.

There are four main tributaries - the Matilija, San Antonio, Coyote and Santa Ana Creeks - which add another sixty miles to the river system and once served as the river's prime steelhead spawning and nursery grounds. Rainfall in the basin averages from fifteen inches at the river's mouth to thirty-five inches at the headwaters. Characteristically, flows are subject to extreme fluctuations, the river often running a city-block wide during the winter while sections frequently

go dry or retain little surface flow during the late summer months.

References to the Ventura River stretch back to the early seventeenth century journal entries of the Spanish Explorer, Sebastian Vizcaino, who was first invited to come ashore near the present site of the city of San Buenaventura by an old man giving "signs that we must go to his land, where they would give us much food and water, for there was a river." The invitation proved fatal, first for the unsuspecting natives, and eventually for the steelhead fishery.

When the Spanish finally founded Mission San Buenaventura near the mouth of the river in 1782, the first major diversion of its water via an aqueduct was begun. Later with the coming of the Americans, the ex-Mission lands became the site of a small farming settlement. With the discovery of oil in 1916, the settlement was soon transformed into a small city. In the wake of these developments came the now familiar spill-over effects of urbanization: increased diversions, dams, flood control projects and pollution.

III

Historical records indicate that the Ventura River provided a reliable food source for the native Chumash Indians and early settlers, and later, regular sport for trout and steelhead anglers. Travelling through southern California in 1911, James Smeaton Chase reported a "fine stream flows into the ocean at the west end of the city, and from May to October the breakfast tables of Ventura need never go troutless." Twenty-seven years later, Donald H. Fry writing in the April issue of California Fish and Game noted that the Ventura River was one of the few streams in southern California having trout down to the ocean. Perhaps the most vivid recollection of the steelheading afforded by the river was recorded in a letter to James Roads written by Edgar Henke, a native of San Buenaventura and currently Co-Chairman of the California Committee of Two Million.

"The Ventura River," Henke recalled,



Edgar Henke with spent steelhead taken several hundred yards above Foster Park bridge in 1946.

"had great runs of migrating steelhead starting anytime after the rains began in the fall. We had fly fishing all summer long for the small grill, and in the late fall, if the river had retained enough water from the winter before, a fall run of what we referred to as 'Roe Chasers.' A colloquialism for us, but referred to in the northern part of the state as 'Half Pounders.' These fish ran to eighteen inches. I can still remember my brother, Ben, and friends and myself lying on the Highway 101 bridge over the Ventura River, a rock's throw from town, and dangling a salmon egg into a school of them . . .

"Approximately five miles inland from the mouth was a famous historical county landmark called Foster Park, and this was the limits and boundary of winter steelheading. As kids we fished the headwaters of the tributaries during the summer trout season and caught a good number of land-locked steelhead up to thirty inches in length. The walks were quite a few miles and the upper reaches had huge holes cut out in solid rock, some fifteen feet deep . . . During the winter there were occasions when my brother and I and friends stood below the falls at the upper reaches of these streams and hand-pitched steelhead over the top so many miles of fertile streambed could be propagated naturally . . .

"Steelheading was an event both winter and summer which brought all of the local town's people together . . . sons and dads alike. Unfortunately, their off-spring and grandchildren will only know of it through this type of poor prose and the fire-side

stories told. It's all part of the adventurous past, and a very poorly written part of our history."

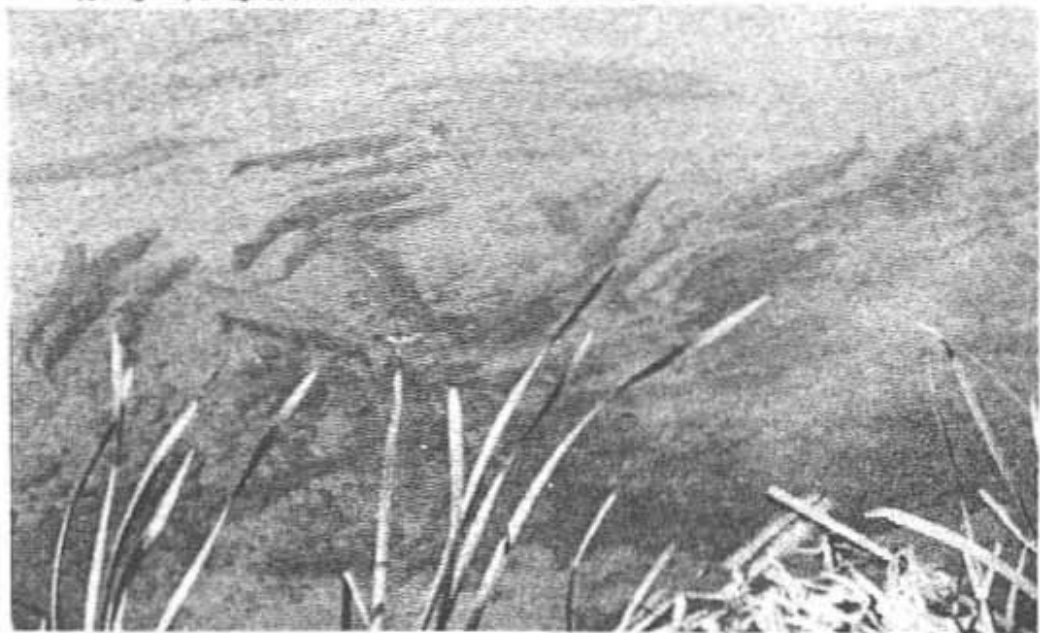
Low water, sometimes the total lack of it in the lower reaches of streams like the Ventura River fostered a form of steelhead fishing in southern California which has since become increasingly popular in more northern waters: surf-fishing at the river's mouth. Claude M. Kreider experimented with the technique and recorded his impressions in a small book entitled "Steelhead," published in 1948. "Surf-casting for steelhead," Kreider explained, "is an interesting game as practiced by many anglers off the little rivers before the tidal bars are open . . . You wear hip boots or waders, hurry out as far as possible with a receding breaker, make a long cast hoping there will not be a backlash on the reel, and then retreat as the next comb comes pounding in. Surf fishermen ply their art through the winter off the Ventura River . . . and frequently enjoy splendid sport, even in seasons when the river cannot break through to the sea. . . in the evening there is the cheerful campfire of crackling salt-impregnated driftwood and the fading outline of the distant channel islands."

IV

Steelheading began to disappear on the Ventura River during the late 1940's with the onset of a prolonged drought and the construction of Matilija Dam. Between 1946 and 1952 the basin's average annual rainfall was cut in half. The seriousness of the drought became apparent by March of 1947. That spring field representatives for the California Department of Fish and Game made an inspection trip to the Ventura River to assess the effects of the low water on the steelhead fishery. The following excerpts from the report filed tell the story: "An estimated 250-300 adult steelhead were found to be present in scattered pools throughout the five mile section between the mouth of the river and Foster Park bridge . . . In general the adult steelhead averaged 24-26 inches in length and weighed an estimated five to six pounds. Occasionally larger fish were found. . .

"In more detail, we examined the river

Ventura River winter steelhead laying in quiet water several hundred yards above U.S. 101 highway bridge at the mouth of the river on March 29, 1947.



mouth and found a large bar present which makes it difficult for the fish to enter the river except at high tide. Although no adults were seen in the ocean, large numbers were reported to be frequently seen just outside the bar. While standing there examining the river mouth, three adult steelhead were seen to enter the river from the ocean . . .

"One hundred yards above the highway 101 bridge, the river widens into the first hole above the lagoon. . . At this point, thirty to forty adult steelhead were seen. Overhanging willows make an ideal location for poaching, which appears to be fairly common. Four dead steelhead were found in the bushes at the pool . . .

"Approximately one-half mile above the Foster Park bridge, the city of Ventura water diversion intake is located. An old intake check dam five feet high exists across the river at this point . . . Only one steelhead was found in the pool below the check dam vainly trying to jump this obstacle. From the check dam down to the Foster Park bridge approximately fifteen adults were seen. Excellent, though limited, spawning gravel was noted and redds were being constructed. . .

"In dry years, such as this, there is an estimated maximum of two miles of fairly suitable spawning area below Foster Park bridge . . . This may support a maximum total of one thousand spawning adult steelhead. Channel improvement to reduce hazards of upstream movement was given consideration, but was decided not feasible in view of the many scattered areas of shallow riffles. . .

"Although it is regrettable that such fine steelhead may be decimated during low water conditions, it is not deemed advisable to take any action at this time, such as rescue or channel improvement."

The steelhead fishery had survived similar droughts. The climate of southern California, historically, has been subject to alternating periods of drought and flooding, fish and wildlife populations fluctuating with the annual rainfall. The effect of the drought during the late 1940's, however, was compounded by the coincidental construction of Matilija Dam on Matilija Creek whose upper reaches were fed by cool springs during even the driest years.

Scheduled for completion by 1948, the Matilija Dam was to be a solid concrete

structure rising 152 feet from the creek bottom. The California Department of Fish and Game was well aware that fresh water trout streams were limited in Ventura County and recommended that every effort should be made to protect them. Staff members also pointed to the economic significance of the Ventura River fishery. It was estimated that the river system supported a minimum of 4000-5000 adult steelhead in an average year, over half of which spawned in the area above the proposed dam site. Census checks had shown 259 steelhead anglers on the opening day along the five mile stretch of stream open to fishing. The economic value of the fishery in 1946 was computed at \$100,000 annually.

Accordingly, a plan was submitted to trap adult migrants at the base of the dam and truck them over the top. It was suggested that the spillway be inclined with a deep hole at the bottom to allow pre-migrants and spawned out adults above the dam to pass downstream. Staff also recommended that sufficient water be released below the dam to maintain resident fish, and that during the spring of the year additional water be released over the spillway to facilitate the passage of downstream migrants.

The fish ladder and holding facilities were to be constructed at county expense. Local opposition to the expenditure was faithfully reflected in a local newspaper editorial:

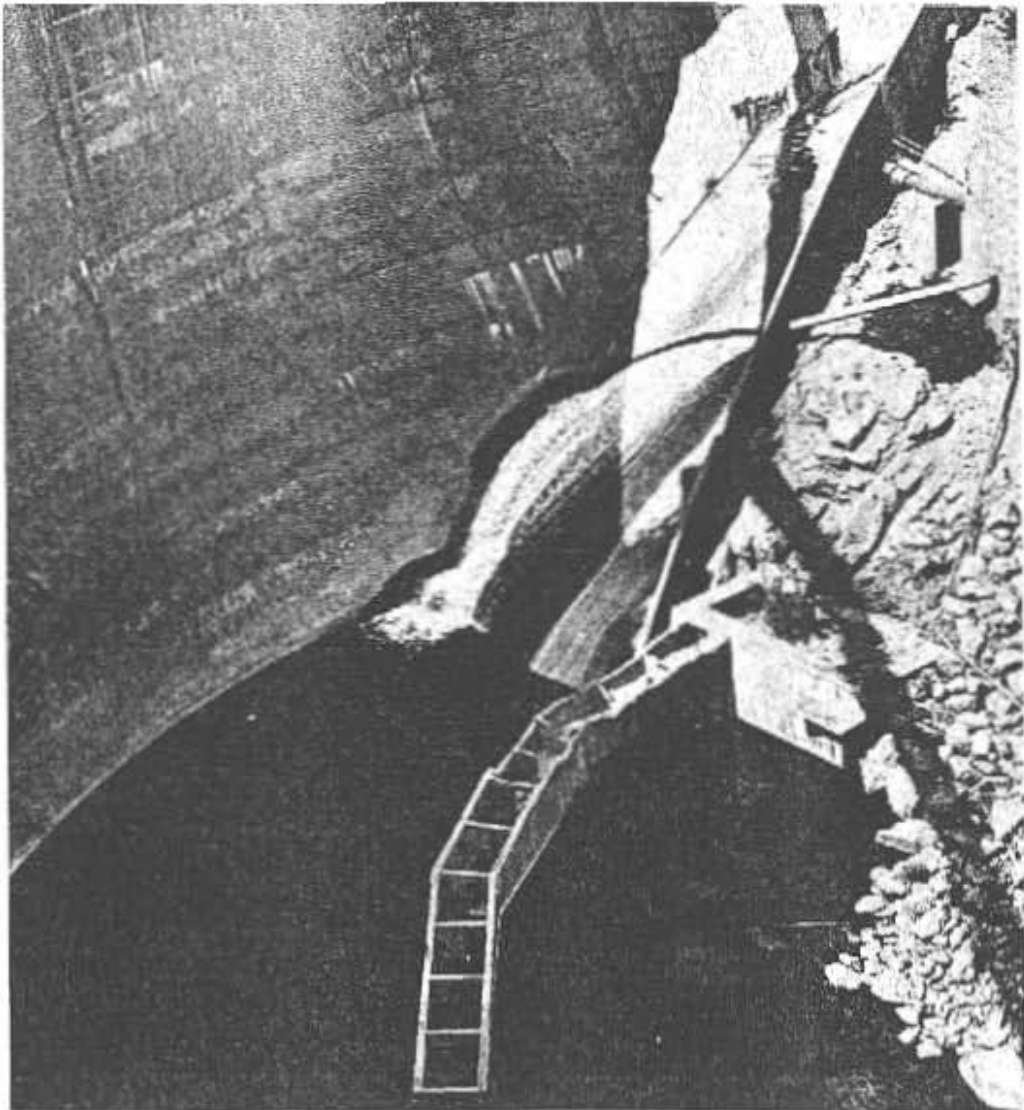
THEIR EXPENSIVE FISH!

"Along come the Fish and Game Commission and tells Zone 1 to spend \$40,000 for a fish ladder. Wonder is they didn't demand an escalator! So, the supervisors, figuring they have to do what the State Fish and Game Commission says, vote the \$40,000. This leaves us wondering about several points: Will \$40,000 worth of fish ever climb that ladder during the lifetime of Matilija Dam? Are there \$40,000 worth of fish in the whole county? If so, where are they?"

While the local county warden had been able to persuade the Board of Supervisors to finance the project, the finished facilities had several serious defects. The step pools of the ladder, built a few yards out from the base of the dam, were subject to inundation by water cresting over the spillway. To further detract from the facilities' effectiveness, additional water was normally released down a side apron on the downstream face of the dam and therefore competed with the smallest flow in the ladder. Steelhead tended to run up the heavier flow which led to a dead end.

Despite staff recommendations, no provisions were made for transporting adult and smolt steelhead caught above the dam downstream: the spillway was a straight drop. Not was water released to facilitate downstream migrants or maintain resident fish populations. Not surprisingly, the fish trapping facilities were hardly used. The last county warden realized in 1953; he reported that the most steelhead he ever saw in the holding tank were three confused adults.

The design of the dam proved as faulty as the fish trapping facilities. Before the concrete had fully set, cracks appeared along the dam's abutments, the project engineer was dismissed, and a law suit was filed against the major contractor. Little more than a decade later a large notch was cut in the face of the dam lowering the spillway thirty feet. The notch, along with unexpected siltation, has reduced the original storage capacity of



Fish ladder and holding tank at base of Matilija Dam, August, 1973.

the lake from 7000 to 2400 acre feet. In 1965, the California Fish and Game Commission authorized deactivation of the fish trapping facilities.

The construction of Casitas Dam on Coyote Creek in 1958 struck another blow to the Ventura River's diminishing steelhead run. Again, no provisions for water releases or means of transporting mature fish upstream to spawn or getting juvenile fish back downstream were incorporated into the project. The anticipated effect of the project on the river's anadromous fishery was bluntly summarized by the Bureau of Reclamation: "With the completion of the project, what steelhead fishery that existed would, in all probability, be destroyed. A large warmwater reservoir would be created."

Much of the water in the Casitas reservoir was to come from the Ventura River via a diversion dam and canal which was expected to restrict, if not completely eliminate, access to the North Fork of the Ventura River. Aside from the smaller San Antonio Creek, this fork would be the only accessible spawning tributary remaining in the system. Initial consideration, therefore, was given by the California Department of Fish and Game towards requiring a fish ladder on the Los Robles diversion facility and providing minimum flows below Casitas Dam.

After considerable discussion, however,

it was decided that a ladder of an adequate design would be prohibitively expensive. Eventually the flow releases were also dropped, despite the suggestion of one staff member that "we protest these three (water) applications on the basis that no water would be released during the winter and spring spawning periods of anadromous fishes, and therefore a valuable steelhead fishery would be lost." In lieu of these mitigations, the Department decided to require only that the diversion dam be designed in such a manner that a fish ladder could be added at some future time should water conditions be favorable for steelhead, and that the outlet at Casitas Dam be screened.

Ironically, at the time these recommendations were being formulated, the Ventura River was experiencing its best steelhead run since the 1947 drought. The period between 1952 and 1958 had been one of normal and above normal run-off and the size of the runs had been increasing.

As has so often been the case, the political climate more than weather conditions seemed to shape the Department's recommendations for the Casitas project. Several years earlier, the Department has suffered a serious setback in its efforts to enforce section 5937 of the California Fish and Game Code which requires the owner of any dam (including the United States) to bypass suf-



August Hahn with winter steelhead from the Ventura River in 1918.

migratory fishery . . . As in the case of Cachuma Reservoir, (on the Santa Ynez River) . . . we may as well consider the steelhead fishing . . . as a thing of the past." The California Department of Fish and Game traditionally has been subject to political interference and has frequently been forced to ask "What can we get by with?" rather than "What should be done?" But as one observer has noted, this defensive mentality has led to a tendency "to retreat before being attacked, to leave a position based on careful research, and to occupy some halfway ground that is untenable, to pull punches and to tell only half of the truth about a situation." Consequently, few effective provisions have been made to perpetuate the steelhead resources in the south-half of the state.

V

What runs have survived have done so in the face of severely hostile conditions. Impoundments and diversions have not been the only obstacles southland trout and steelhead have had to overcome. Pollution and physical alteration of the streambeds have also been a continuous problem.

The lower Ventura River runs through an oil rich valley, first exploited in earnest during the 1920's. Until recently oil companies practiced a primitive form of waste disposal, slushing their holding ponds of drilling mud and brine into the river during the first heavy rain of the season. Anglers frequently complained of their catches tasting of petroleum. Fish kills were common, the lines impinged merely an inexpensive

(Continued on Page 44)

ficient water to protect downstream fisheries or provide some other means for the preservation of fish. The issue was raised in connection with the Friant Dam on the San Joaquin River, a major component in the massive Central Valley Project. The Department had asked for water releases below Friant Dam to protect a salmon run estimated at 242,625 fish annually. In the course of the litigation, the State Attorney General ruled the code section inoperative, arguing that it was "not a reservation of water for preservation of fishlife,

but is rather a standard for the release of water in excess of what is needed for domestic and irrigation purposes so that what is available for fish life shall not be wastefully withheld." It was with some justification, then, that a Department official commenting on the Ventura County Water Project should concede: "I think we are going to have to face this water conservation program with a very 'dim view' as to the fisheries below these impounded dams . . . Our best plan is not to aim at demanding releases below the considered impoundment to support a

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VENTURA RIVER

(Continued from Page 18)

service charge for using the river as an open sewer.

With the decline of drilling and production, other oil related industries began to develop along portions of the river. In 1951 the Shell Oil Company put a urea plant on the stream. The discharge of 210,000 gallons per day from the plant became so toxic that the lower three miles of the river were rendered lifeless. In 1970 independent groups began investigating the discharge.

Students monitored the plant around the clock, while the Community Environmental Council of Santa Barbara enlisted the aid of a chemist from the University of California at Santa Barbara to analyze the plant's discharge. When two student investigators recorded an interview with a Shell quality control engineer at the plant, the tape was seized by company officials. The students later testified that the engineer had spoken casually about accidental spills, lax enforcement of pollution controls, and the company's practice of coloring the plant's smoke white to make it look like steam.

The legal machinery moved slowly, but after a year of concerted effort a Federal Grand Jury handed down an indictment on four counts of discharging toxic amounts of ammonia into the river. Shell became the first continuing polluter convicted in California under the old Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899 and was fined \$10,000. The plant was soon shut down for economic reasons. Current plans are to reactivate the plant as an oil de-sulphurization unit with all discharges processed through a nearby sewage treatment plant.

Though the Shell Urea plant was the most serious source of pollution in the lower river, numerous smaller polluters continue to discharge effluents into the river through a system of drainage conduits. A rock quarry operation had been washing its tailing into this system until a Regional Water Quality Control Board, at the prodding of the California Department of Fish and Game, ordered a halt to the discharge. The Oak View Sanitary District has since 1964 discharged two cubic feet per second of secondary treated sewage directly into the river. A recent Federal grant to "fail-safe" the plant, however, is expected to improve the discharge slightly and prevent the frequent eruptions of detergent foams. Near the river's mouth a sand & gravel operation removes 200,000 tons of material annually from the river and the adjacent flood plain seriously disrupting the lotic and riparian plant communities. The problems are common, even classic examples of the abuses heaped upon the rivers and streams throughout California.

VI

With these deteriorated conditions the Ventura River has somehow maintained a remnant run of steelhead and supports a small population of resident trout and other fishes. In one sense conditions are idyllic. Robert Hogan, a local regular on the river explains "... over the past fifteen or sixteen years many more fish would have been taken but due to the lack of fishermen, this has not been the case. When there exists favorable water conditions, I fish three or four times a week and seldom see another

angler."

Acknowledging the considerable problems confronting the Ventura River, the Ventura County Fish and Game Commission has recently issued a report calling for the protection of the river's existing fish and wildlife, and the rehabilitation of its trout and steelhead fisheries. The proposal comes in the form of a two part program: (1) the perpetuation and enhancement of a live recreational stream in the lower reaches of the river free from pollution and incompatible developments, and (2) the rehabilitation of the river's formerly productive sport fisheries. Both programs will require that a master plan be prepared for the preservation and maintenance of the area's natural resources for their intrinsic, recreational and educational value, and that the plan recognize these as the highest and best uses of the area.

Some important ground work has already been laid. The county and city of Ventura, for example, have recently adopted open space plans which designate the undeveloped portions of the Ventura River flood plain as open space. Both plans acknowledge the fish and wildlife values of the river and the potential for future water related recreational activities.

The Regional Water Quality Control Board, Los Angeles, in addition, has recognized spawning, migratory and cold water habitats as existing beneficial uses of the Ventura River in its interim basin study. This recognition will be taken into account when the state revamps waste discharge requirements for the basin.

Land use management is another important phase of the Ventura River project in which some progress has been made. Last year a major effort to develop a large parcel of land along the lower river set off an environmental controversy which is still reverberating. Only after an unusual demonstration of public opposition at a city council meeting attended by over 1400 people were the plans to develop the area laid to rest.

More recently, the County Planning Commission and County Board of Supervisors denied a proposal to build a large mobile home park on the flood plain of San Antonio Creek immediately above its confluence with the Ventura River. One planning Commissioner noted that it was the first time during his ten years on the Commission that a developer had been denied a permit for a project which had the proper zoning and which had met all of the conditions imposed by county officials. Potential flooding was cited as a major consideration, but other environmental factors played an important part in the decision. The developer even felt compelled to retain a special consultant to assess the effects of the proposed stream alteration on the steelhead spawning beds in San Antonio Creek.

The question of water, certainly, is central to the Commission's proposals. Normally there is adequate winter run-off to allow upstream migration of adults, but the late spring and summer low flows are often critically reduced as a result of the upstream water projects. In a sharp reversal of its original position, the California Department of Fish and Game recently requested the State Attorney General to petition the State Water Resources Control Board to re-open the hearings on the license covering the operation of the Matilija and Los Robles facilities so that new information and recommenda-

tions could be given for the rehabilitation of the steelhead fishery.

In its petition, the Department contended that the projects "should be operated in a manner which will restore this valuable steelhead run and that public interest in 1973 has changed from what it was in 1946 and 1956 to such an extent that there is now a recognition of the desirability of maintaining California's fishery resources especially in an area of high population level such as exists in Ventura County and Southern California." Similar petitions were filed by the Northern California Council of Fly Fishing Clubs and the Environmental Coalition of Ventura County. While the petitions were denied for procedural reasons, the Board did indicate that "the Department is not without a remedy to require the (Casitas Municipal Water) District to provide minimum flows or alternative means for the preservation of fish." A State Attorney General's opinion issued March 12, 1973 appears to support this contention by reversing the previous interpretation of code section 5937, declaring that the section is "unambiguous" insofar as it requires the owner of any dam to release sufficient water below the dam to keep in good conditions any fish that may exist or be planted below the impoundment.

Predictably, the political pressures generated by these developments have become intense. The Casitas Municipal Water District has announced that releasing water into the Ventura River in compliance with 5937 would cause extreme financial hardship to the District. Recently the District retained the services of William Gianelli, former head of the California Water Project, to review the status of the District's water rights. The California Department of Fish and Game in the meantime is studying the matter further, while several conservation groups are considering the possibility of taking independent legal action. The final outcome of the dispute could have a bearing on streams throughout the state facing similar problems.

VII

The Ventura County Fish and Game Commission's report concedes that rehabilitation of the Ventura River is an ambitious undertaking, but argues that it is a challenge that can be met if public and private interests are willing to work together. It appears that some of the cooperation necessary is already in evidence, though a great deal remains to be done if southern Californians are again going to realize the challenge and sport of a winter steelhead fishery. The Commission's underlying thesis, however, is that fish and wildlife resources can be restored by the creative use of the same tools and techniques that have traditionally been used to reduce or destroy these resources.

In addressing the water problem, the Commission raises some fundamental questions about resource management: Will the existing and planned water resources be used to support increased industrial activity and encourage an expansion of the present population without sufficient regard to the social and environmental costs? Or will a more balanced approach be developed that will insure long term stability and preservation of historic natural amenities? The questions have wide application; the answers that are developed may ultimately determine the future, not only of the Ventura River, but all of California's steelhead streams. □