



Question:

Do the estuary and watershed support a healthy population of steelhead trout?

What we measured: Number of steelhead in local creeks

Answer:

No. While an inventory in 2002 identified several thousand steelhead, the population is much lower than historic levels. The Morro Bay watershed contains much viable habitat for steelhead. However, invasive species, fish migration barriers, and low summer flows continue to limit the number of steelhead trout in local creeks.

Why This Is Important:

Steelhead numbers have drastically decreased along the Central Coast, leading to their designation as a federally threatened species. Degraded habitat, lack of freshwater flow, barriers to migration, and predation by invasive Sacramento pikeminnow continue to challenge the population.

Steelhead are the anadromous form of rainbow trout, which means that they hatch and grow in freshwater streams, then migrate to the ocean where they typically grow much larger than their freshwater kin. The adult steelhead then return to freshwater creeks and streams to spawn and lay eggs, starting the cycle again. This life cycle makes steelhead a good indicator of ecosystem health because they need healthy conditions in the creeks, the estuary, and the ocean to thrive. Cool clean water and abundant riparian (streamside) vegetation are especially important for steelhead in our watershed creeks.



Barriers such as bridge crossings, culverts, dams and insufficient freshwater flows can block steelhead migration.

Barriers to Steelhead Migration



Narrow crossings under bridges, poorly designed culverts, dams and insufficient freshwater flows all constitute barriers to steelhead migration. A study conducted in 2002 identified six high and medium priority barriers in the Morro Bay watershed, indicated on the map above. Removal of these barriers would provide additional valuable steelhead habitat. Steelhead populations were surveyed in 2001 in areas where access was allowed. The estimated abundance based on those surveys is indicated in the legend. The Chorro Creek estimate does not include any tributaries to Chorro Creek.

References:
Final Report: Morro Bay Watershed Stream Crossing Inventory and Fish Passage Evaluation, 2003, Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District survey
Header photo by Dan Dugan