

Sacramento River Faces Challenges

by Rex Stromness

From its source, a bountiful spring at the base of Mt. Shasta, the Sacramento River meanders south passing through deep canyons before encountering its major obstacle, Lake Shasta. From there, now joined by the Pit and McCloud Rivers and a host of creeks, the expanding river runs down the heart of the Sacramento Valley. After absorbing the Feather and American Rivers the Sac heads southwest to form (along with the San Joaquin River) the massive Delta before ending it's journey in San Pablo Bay.

At 382 miles, the Sacramento is the longest, largest and most important river in California, one that has, since the arrival of Europeans, been a major source of transportation, agriculture and controversy. Over millennia in its unbridled, wild state, the river changed its course countless times flooding the valley, creating habitat for one of the largest migratory bird populations on the planet while depositing deep, rich layers of soil.

Over millennia in its unbridled, wild state, the river changed its course countless times, flooding the valley, creating habitat for one of the largest migratory bird populations on the planet....

Chinook salmon use the river as their main artery on their amazing return to their ancestral spawning grounds after two to four years at sea. Native Americans honored the river's tumultuous way and didn't reside near the shores, choosing instead to occupy higher ground along tributaries. They did hunt and fish the abundant wildlife in the vast riparian area created by the river. It is thought that in earlier times there existed over one-half million acres of riparian habitat and associated oak woodlands along the river and tributaries.

Things quickly began to change shortly after the arrival of the early gold-seeking Europeans in the mid 1800's. Soon wetlands were drained for agriculture, levees were built to contain the river's natural tendency to flood and dams were built on the Sacramento and its tributaries to capture the Sierra and Coast Range runoff and to generate electricity. The once wild, free-flowing river was reduced to a canal in some stretches -- no longer existing on its own terms.

These days the river and its inhabitants face challenges from several fronts, not the least of which is the Bush administration's regressive environmental policies. Although the Chinook population has recovered from a low point less than 200 winter-run fish in 1991 (measured at the Red Bluff Diversion Dam), they remain at the mercy of humans and their politics. Dams, water temperature fluctuations, reduced flows, pollution and other human made conditions make for a tenuous existence for salmon. But, according to John

Merz of the Sacramento River Preservation Trust, there is some good news regarding Salmon and the river in general.

“On a purely natural level, ocean conditions have been great for Salmon the past few years,” says Merz. “Salmon are cold water fish and in non El Nino years (El Nino creates warmer ocean temperatures) there seems to be more food available at sea. As far as human improvements for the fish, there have been a few dams taken down, fish ladders have been improved, there is a better diversion schedule and fish screens at canal intakes are much improved. It’s been teamwork between the fishing industry, government and environmentalists that has improved things...unfortunately, the agricultural community hasn’t been real cooperative.”

Since salmon need cold water new mandatory minimum levels (at least 900,000 acre feet) at Lake Shasta have been a factor in keeping water temperatures in the river down and the population up. It has also helped that fishing in the main stem of the Sacramento is banned between mid January and mid July.

The restoration of riparian habitat along the river has been another area where positive things have been occurring. Acquisitions by state and federal agencies along with environmental organizations and private entities has meant good news for the health of the River and surrounding areas.

Merz points to the 1994 Bay/Delta Accord and the establishment of CALFED funding as a landmark event in the acquisition and restoration of riparian habitat. Along with land purchases, CALFED funded independent studies of the River and bought new, state-of-the-art fish screens for canal intakes. Groups such as The Nature Conservancy, River Partners, the state park system and even BLM have been purchasing marginal farmlands and allowing and encouraging them to return to a more natural state.

“There is more habitat and better environmental practices along the entire watershed,” Merz explains. “this has meant a resurgence in salmon as well as other threatened species such as the Bank Swallow, the Swainson’s hawk and even the infamous Valley Elderberry beetle. Our group has played a role in education and calling people on their stuff.... We are a watchdog organization.”

To experience the wild river and riparian habitat first-hand, Chico and Butte County residents can simply take West Sacramento or Highway 32 to River Road to the Bidwell-Sacramento River State Park and Indian Fishery. Here you will see the former river channel now a beautiful lagoon that is home to Herons, Ducks and other waterfowl as well as Beaver, Otter and other native creatures. There is short trail through grassland and huge, ancient Valley Oaks. Just south of the fishery you can experience more native habitat with Oaks, Sycamores, Willow, and Black Walnut. Wild grapes weave their way around the trees creating a lush riparian jungle. Finally, at the “washout,” you get a full view of the majestic river where, during big storms, it still floods every year.

Today, despite its many human caused challenges, the great mother river endures.

For information regarding the river, contact the Sacramento River Preservation Trust at 345-1865

This article originally appeared in [Summer/Fall 2005 Environmental News](#).