

Saving the Salmon

A new environmental issue has recently sparked a great deal of controversy in my community. On the main stem of the Yuba River, which runs through my county, there is a dam, called Englebright dam, that creates a lake. The dam's main purpose is to provide recreation, but does not serve as a source of flood control or water supply, contrary to the beliefs of some people. It was originally built as a trap for debris from upstream mine and logging waste, however, the dam prevents salmon from migrating upstream to spawn. The fish must remain a few miles below the dam to spawn in a limited habitat incapable of supporting a large population. In order to increase the salmon population, the availability of spawning habitat must also increase. Salmon eggs cannot survive in water warmer than 58 degrees Fahrenheit, according to Dick Daniel, an assistant director in Calfed's ecosystem restoration program. "We can't cool off the Yuba River below Englebright sufficiently for the needs of these fish," he said.

Calfed is an organization concerned with ecosystem restoration and would like to increase opportunities for salmon to live further upstream in rivers in the central valley. Thus, the population of salmon, which is currently an endangered species, would increase. However, efforts to protect salmon cause problems with the diversion of water for irrigation and drinking and have encountered a great deal of opposition.

Ninety-five percent of spawning habitat has been eliminated by the construction of dams in the San Joaquin Valley, so a logical step would be to remove several dams. There are other rivers in the central valley, such as the Feather River, with dams on them, but most of these dams are multi-purpose dams. They provide not only recreation, but flood control, water supply, and hydropower as well. Thus, the Englebright dam is the prime candidate for removal; it would

have the least environmental impact and the river upstream is in better condition than other streams. It has the most restoration potential with the least amount of social harm. If the salmon were able to swim upstream, the availability of spawning habitat would increase and the salmon population would be boosted.

There is considerable opposition in my community to this removal plan. Some argue that Yuba City, a nearby town, will flood if the dam is removed, but Englebright dam itself does not provide flood control. However, if there was no dam, debris and sediment would flow downstream and increase the stream bed elevation, causing a temporary increase in flood risk. Englebright Lake is a center for recreation, and people do not want to lose that, although other local options do exist. They don't understand the importance of saving a species of fish. Indeed there is no clear reason why the salmon should be saved, although it would be unique to our county if we had some of the last remaining salmon. It is partially an issue of morals and whether or not humans should be able to control the fate of a species. Legally, the Endangered Species Act states that efforts must be made to protect endangered species, such as the salmon.

There are other solutions to the problem besides the complete removal of Englebright dam. One possibility is to lower the height of the dam and install fish ladders. This would allow the salmon to make their way upstream, and debris could be maintained, thus avoiding the downstream pollution and flooding problems. Studies are being conducted to determine the feasibility of getting the salmon past the dam, and whether or not the effort would be worth while.

The removal of Englebright Dam is a very controversial issue that has provoked heated debate in town meetings, among individual people, and in the newspaper. It will be interesting to see how this issue evolves. I am going to keep an open mind about it and relay the information

that I know to people, so that educated opinions can be formed.

*information for this essay was obtained through an interview with Nick Wilcox, an employee for the State Water Resources Control Board