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## FISH OF THE FUTURE

By

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Sitting in an aluminum rowboat on a small pond in 1978, the great Oregon steelhead guide Andy Landforce watched his bobber go under, set the hook and hauled in another seven-inch panfish. As he tossed it into a bucket, he turned and said to me, “Bluegills. Fish of the future.” For Landforce, a man with a deeper understanding of steelhead behavior and biology than nearly anyone on the planet, the day was a pleasant diversion from the steep, rocky coastal rivers where he worked, a chance to unwind and procure a favorite dinner. For me, a steelhead-crazed lunatic of twelve, it was torture. Although any day on the water with Andy was full of happiness and education, I yearned to be fishing for *real* fish. I wanted to fish for *steelhead*.

What I didn’t understand at the time, though the words stuck with me, is how prophetic his thinking might turn out to be. This was the heyday of hatchery production, when limits of winter fish on the Alsea and summer fish on the Santiam were the norm. When Landforce could guide inexperienced anglers and expect to fill the fish box every day of the season. When a kid, whose single mom drove him to the river every Sunday and waited in the car, could drag his old yellow rod and Pip’s leader dispenser full of Glo-Gos down the bank and average more than a fish a trip.

What none of us, except maybe Andy Landforce, realized then was that, to paraphrase a once popular song, *those were the good old days*. The days before the hatchery’s too-good-to-be-true population boom proved to be exactly that. Before hardly anyone understood the value of genetic diversity and wild, streamborn steelhead populations. Before we discovered that hatchery mitigation for overfishing, logging and stream bed degradation was fool’s gold. The vultures were already circling, but most of us were too busy fishing to see them.

Fast forward to 2007, and I would argue that the vultures are still circling the carcass of our last remaining wild steelhead populations, but there are more of them, and they’re getting closer. The genetic collapse of Alsea hatchery steelhead (and for that matter, Fall Creek coho) is well documented and the boom-to-bust cycle has repeated itself across the

West. While the Bush administration may consider hatchery and wild fish to be one and the same, anyone who's spent much time on the water understands that steelhead raised in concrete runways are a sorry excuse for *real* fish. Washington's ubiquitous Chambers Creek winter steelhead, after generations of catch and kill fisheries, have devolved into a species of barely-biting pseudo-steelhead that race from saltwater to the hatchery in a matter of days, if not hours. Would anyone today willingly trade a 10-pound Skamania-stock hatchery summer run for the free-rising, native Puget Sound one-salt steelhead? Not if you want to fish for them in places other than the hatchery "meat holes" with hundreds of your best friends. But for some reason, that's the trade our fish managers and politicians offered us years ago; a trade too many of us at the time were more than willing to make.

Call it human arrogance or call it optimism, but the idea that man could do better than nature with our high-protein fish chow pellets and perfectly aerated egg trays hasn't really panned out, has it? We seem to have succeeded in creating a race of steelhead that, as smolts, rise to the shadows of mergansers and cormorants expecting to be fed. That, when faced with adverse ocean conditions, simply disappear or return in paltry numbers of small, malnourished adults. By taking natural selection out of the spawning and rearing process, we've designed a fish doomed to failure. Of course, there are still some relatively "healthy" hatchery runs in existence, but the fact is, the future we're all facing requires more resilient, better adapted fish. You know, the kind nature designed.

So hatcheries clearly are not the answer. Not if you value steelhead for what makes them so special—individual races of fish perfectly evolved for their specific watersheds; or their willingness to aggressively move for a swung fly, spoon or spinner; or the spirit of the wild places that they embody. Not if you want to avoid the incredibly low (and steadily decreasing) returns most hatchery runs around the Northwest are experiencing. And especially not if you need a fish with the natural survival skills and genetic diversity to survive our changing world. In short, wild steelhead, spawned and reared in healthy rivers and streams, are really the only hope we have.

And yet, those damn vultures keep circling: Even on the pristine British Columbia coast, industrial fish farms pollute nearshore waters and cover outmigrating smolts with terminal doses of sea lice. Farther south, from Vancouver, B.C. to Los Angeles, population growth and greed propels unabated development in our rural watersheds. Did anyone notice they hauled away an entire mountain on the banks of the fabled Skykomish River to make way for a Fred Meyers parking lot? The steelhead did. And they've responded by coming back in fewer and fewer numbers to the point where even the low-impact spring catch-and-release fishery had to be closed. Maybe not specifically because of one parking lot, but it's a highly visible piece of that watershed's degradation and a symbol of what's going on around our rivers in general.

Suburban sprawl and the resulting lawn chemicals, driveway drippings and non-porous pavement. Clearcut logging. Commercial by-catch. Coal-bed methane. Precious metal mines. River flows controlled by hydroelectric and farming interests. Habitat destruction.

Winner-lose-all disputes between tribes, commercial and sport anglers... It's a wonder there are any wild steelhead left at all today.

And now, Global Warming. The big bad wolf is at the door, and he's bringing hot summer stream temperatures, more catastrophic flooding, lower snowpack levels and changing ocean conditions. Al Gore may not have invented climate change (or the internet, for that matter) but he's brought it to our attention, and the news for anadromous fish is not good.

So, what can we do? Is it hopeless? In a word, no. But unless you want the name of this magazine to be *Crappie Perch Bluegiller*, it's time to take action. I know, I know, there's nothing most anglers (or most human beings) like less than politics. I also understand with families, careers and homes to take care of, it's hard enough to find spare time to even go fishing. I sympathize that money is tight. Believe me, I understand these things because they all apply to me. The fact is, if you like fish and fishing and rivers enough to read this magazine you need to do something. It doesn't have to be a lot, it doesn't have to take over your life, but you simply have to do *something*.

Skip a ballgame or a day on the river to volunteer a few hours with an environmental organization you believe in. You can get outside and work on stream restoration with your fishing buddies or lick envelopes and make phone calls from your couch. Or, if money is easier to give than time, put off that new rod or reel and contribute to the Wild Steelhead Coalition, the Wild Salmon Center, The Steelhead Society of B.C. or another worthy group.

Do these groups really make a difference? Absolutely. For example, the Wild Steelhead Coalition, a group of Washington fly and gear anglers brought together and motivated by the precipitous decline of wild, Puget Sound spring steelhead are currently hard at work on a number of different fronts. This year alone, money and time donated to the Wild Steelhead Coalition led directly to publication of their highly influential Wild Steelhead Management Plan, a science-based whitepaper that's currently helping to reshape steelhead policies in Washington state. They were also a part of the broad coalition of wild fish conservation groups that won a recent court decision denying the Bush administration's attempts to include hatchery fish in the overall fish counts when assessing salmon run health—a huge victory. Additionally, the WSC hosts an annual Wild Steelhead Summit, bringing fish managers, scientists, anglers and other stakeholders from across the West together to share information and cooperate in the effort to ensure wild steelhead survival. And they're on the ground—or more appropriately, in the water—supporting smolt tagging studies to learn more about Puget Sound juvenile survival issues and working with several local organizations to improve in-stream steelhead habitat. Yes, they are making a difference, and yes, donated time and money is well spent. But every organization doing this kind of work needs more of both, and that means you.

Of course, if all that's a little too “organizational” for your tastes, that's cool. You can contribute on a more personal level. Send letters to the editor of your local paper. Stay

informed about decisions that affect the fish and watersheds you love. Walk a small stream near where you live and learn how to protect or restore it. Write to your local and state representatives to support measures you have a stake in.

And while you're at it, even the tiniest things will help. Don't buy farm-raised salmon. Let the lawn go brown in the summer. Stop using fertilizer and pesticides in your yard. (If you think that won't make a difference, note that all the adult salmon returning to a painstakingly restored Seattle stream last year died immediately upon entering freshwater. The cause? A toxic stew of common yard chemicals and car drippings in the suburban runoff.) Take a driftboat instead of the sled when you can. Eat organic, local food. Purchase your outdoor gear from companies that actively support environmental causes. These small measures, once the realm of granola-crunching tree huggers, are now vitally important to all of us who spend time in the outdoors—especially steelhead anglers.

Awfully preachy, I know. I apologize. But those vultures up there are circling tighter and tighter by the day, and I for one am not ready to give up and spend my days chasing bluegills. Simply put, I am, and have always been, a steelhead fisherman. If you've stuck with me this far, I would guess you are too. In order to keep that a possibility for the rest of our lives, not to mention our children's, we have to start doing something now. We have to work individually and we have to work together. The old sixties catchphrase "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem" was never more true than it is today.

Whether you drift pink worms, pull plugs, run a float and jig, plunk or swing flies, we now find ourselves in the same boat, as it were. Without healthy steelhead populations in our rivers, there will be no steelhead fishing. Period. It's time to get together, put aside our personal differences and political affiliations, and look at what we have in common—a shared love for steelhead and the responsibility to do as much as we can to help them survive. I don't think Andy Landforce, my old steelhead mentor, will mind a bit if we prove him wrong and make *steelhead* the fish of the future. I believe we can.