

All eyes on Bay trout

■ A study will urge that Alameda County ask for federal money to protect steelheads traveling upstream

By Bonita Brewer
TIMES STAFF WRITER

FREMONT — They're elusive. They're clever. And they're strong. But as determined as they are to migrate from San Francisco Bay to suitable spawning grounds up Alameda Creek, steelhead trout need help from humans to get past all the man-made barriers.

A study to be released this week will recommend that Alameda County seek federal help in restoring a steelhead run by funding most of the \$2 million-plus cost of building fish ladders over the barriers.

The largest steelhead seen in the creek in many years — a 17½-pound female full of eggs — was rescued with a net Thursday by a dozen people who then released the fish upstream in Niles Canyon toward Sunol, past a series of dams and structures along the lower end of the creek in the Fremont area.

"That's a huge steelhead!" exclaimed one rescuer as the 34-inch-long silvery fish — with a rainbow-colored sheen and black spots — thrashed and splashed trying to avoid the nets, only to finally give up.

"This is the biggest I've ever seen here," East Bay Regional Park District fisheries specialist Pete Alexander said of the sleek, muscular steelhead.

Before setting the steelhead free in Niles Canyon, the rescuers attached a tiny radio transmitter onto it to track its movements. They also took a small piece of one of its fins to conduct genetic tests to see if the fish is native to the area.

Supporters of restoring a steelhead habitat in Alameda Creek say they're doing it for the love of the fish, which is federally listed as a threatened species in Central California. They also are doing it for humankind and for the environment.

"They're a very cool fish to watch, and steelhead are indicators of a healthy stream," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "This is a stream that's used for (domestic) water supply, and also for recreation and aesthetics.

"If these fish are allowed to return (from the ocean) to spawn, it

Bay trout



A FEMALE STEELHEAD TROUT, rescued from Alameda Creek on Thursday, is transferred to a truck-mounted freshwater tank.

will give people motivation to protect and restore this watershed," Miller added. "There's a lot of pressure for development and to pull more water out of the creek, to build more rubber dams and to channelize.

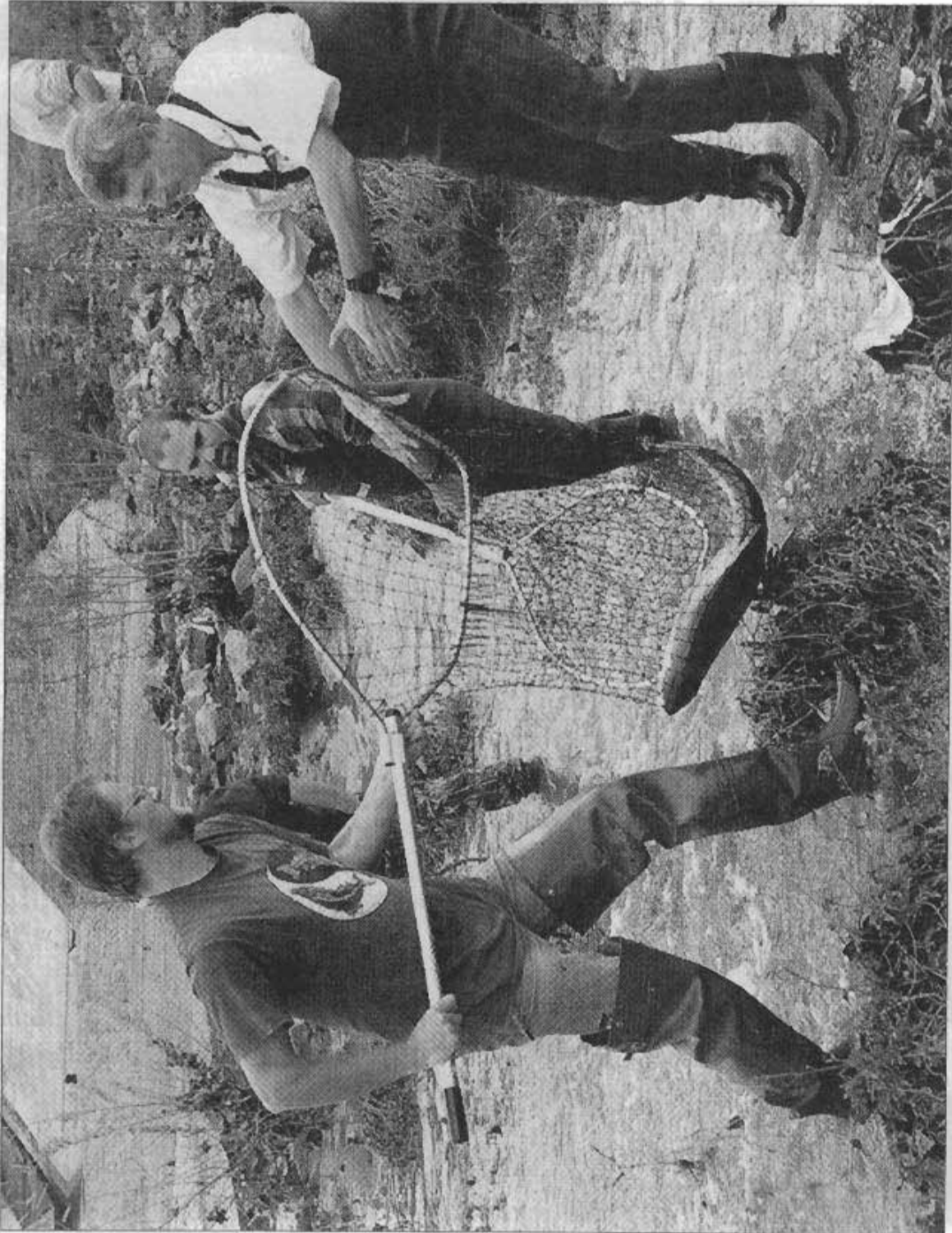
"Fish would give people a good reason to care. For the last 40 years, this creek has been viewed as plumb-

ing, and we're trying to get people to look at it as habitat."

The creek takes drainage from a 700-square-mile watershed in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, including the Livermore-Amador and San Ramon valleys.

"There's an intrinsic value to sav-

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JEFF MILLER of the Alameda Creek Alliance, left, **Manny Da Costa** of the Alameda County Flood Control District and **Pete Alexander**, a fishery biologist, net a female trout that was trying to swim upstream and became stranded.

JIM McIVER/EVERETT COLLECTION

Trout

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ing steelhead," said Richard Weitzig, who recently retired as an Alameda County Clean Water Program official but who was on hand Thursday for the fish rescue. "People love to see fish. People really respond."

Thursday's fish rescue comes just days before the release of a creek-restoration study funded by Alameda County and the California Coastal Conservancy. The \$40,000 study was conducted by county-hired consultants with input from a work group that includes representatives of water and flood control districts, fish and game officials, fishery biologists and alliance members.

"The general conclusion of the draft is that it's feasible to restore steelhead to Alameda Creek, that there's plenty of suitable spawning and rearing habitat and there are cold enough water temperatures," Miller said. "It found that the main impediment to restoring a run is the barriers in the lower creek."

The study says a minimal fish run could be restored by building three fish ladders to help trout migrate upstream over dams at the lower end of the creek. It will reportedly recommend that the county ask the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to provide 75 percent of the money for the ladder project, estimated at between \$2 million and \$3 million. The county would need to come up with the 25-percent local share, possibly with

help from grants.

The initial project would restore a run into Niles Canyon on Alameda Creek and a tributary, Stonybrook Creek. Additional actions would restore a run all the way into Sunol Regional Wilderness, including either removing or modifying a nonfunctioning dam near Sunol for up to \$1.3 million, and building ladders over a PG&E natural-gas crossing in Sunol Valley.

Weitzig said the study determined the minimal run into Niles Canyon could be restored without requiring water and flood-control agencies to substantially change their operations,

if at all.

But the study addresses some issues that could prove to be controversial: what it might take to improve water flows for fish along Alameda Creek and its feeders, including Arroyo Mocho in the Livermore-Amador Valley.

The water-flow issue has raised concerns from water agencies serving the valleys and the Fremont area, along with the San Francisco Water Department, which manages the watershed in the Sunol region. The agencies have warned that municipal water supplies could be affected if they're required to release water

from dams, or to change other operations, in order to maintain year-round flows for fish.

Weitzig said the study doesn't make conclusions and even suggests that water from other sources could be diverted into the creek, rather than forcing local agencies to use existing supplies.