

Real-Life Solutions

SAN GERONIMO GC, SAN GERONIMO, CALIF.

Save Me Some Salmon

It's no fish tale: The San Geronimo GC crew, with the help of local environmentalists, built a ladder in the middle of the course to help an endangered species spawn

BY KAREN R. OLSON

Wild coho salmon are literally jumping for their existence at San Geronimo GC, which is located in San Geronimo, Calif., near San Francisco. The 10-pound fish make their final journey from the Pacific Ocean through the watershed and into the San Geronimo Creek, which runs between the seventh and eighth greens of the course, where their spawning beds are located.

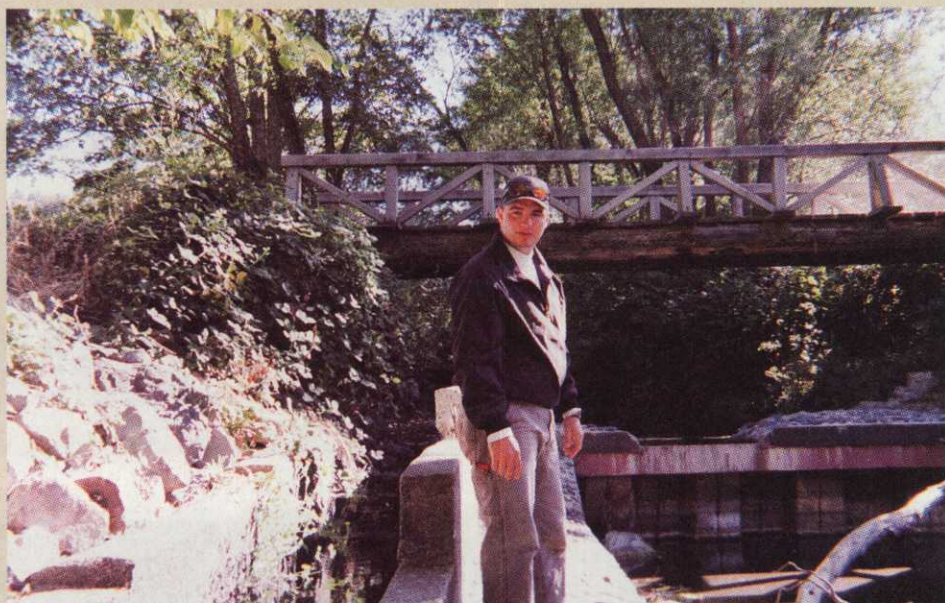
"When I first saw those huge orange fish swimming

Problem

Wild coho salmon, an endangered species, found their migration blocked after a fish ladder collapsed under the pressure of heavy rains.

Solution

Clear away the debris and build the salmon a new ladder, with the help of local environmental groups.



Scott Carrier, San Geronimo's superintendent, says he's excited to be involved with the ongoing salmon-saving project.

up the creek near our maintenance area, I was tempted to grab my fly rod," says Guy Auxer, vice president of agronomy for Evergreen Alliance Golf Ltd., the company that owns the course. "Then someone told me that the salmon are listed as a federally threatened species."

It's a wonder the salmon are still swimming. Increased land development, erosion, extended droughts, river damming and changes in ocean temperature have made it difficult for the salmon to complete the journey. As a result, the California Coho salmon population plunged from 500,000 in the 1940s to an estimated 500 in 1997.

In 1996, a crisis at San Geronimo added to the

salmon's plight. But the fish received some much-needed help from their friends at the course, whose work reopened the salmon's traditional spawning ground.

The problem

A fish ladder had been built in 1954 to help the salmon complete their yearly migration over what was known as Roy's Dam, a 30-by-10-foot dam built in the river. In 1996, however, the ladder was destroyed by heavy rains and the rush of sediments that had built up over 70 years.

The fish, unable to find the original ladder, were suddenly beached — creating a potential public relations disaster for the course in this environmentally sensitive

part of the United States. "I had an unexpected challenge presented to me as the new course superintendent," says Scott Carrier, San Geronimo's superintendent.

It was Todd Steiner, a biologist and director of Salmon Protection And Watershed Network (SPAWN), who discovered the problem. Steiner was driving past the course one day and noticed a beached fish lying on top of the dam. At the time, the course was in the process of being sold, and Steiner wasn't sure who to contact about the problem. So he took the story directly to the media.

Within the next few days, CNN, along with several local television stations, positioned their cameras at the golf course, catching the stranded fish on film and

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bringing national attention to the demise of the species.

The media attention helped proactive citizens obtain an emergency removal permit from the National Marine Fisheries Service. Safely netted and then released to the unobstructed side of the dam, the fish continued their migration. But the solution was temporary and the problem apparent.

The solution

Scientific reports suggested that the watershed and San Geronimo Creek contained 10 percent of the remaining Coho fish population.

The solution was simple: The old ladder needed to be

demolished and removed to make way for a new one.

The golf course was suddenly in charge of designing and constructing a new ladder. Fortunately, local environmental groups threw their support behind the project and offered their expert advice. For the next year, private individuals, wildlife organizations and governmental agencies joined in a series of meetings with golf course management.

Recognition of the project also found its way to the Department of the Interior in Washington D.C. In 1998, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt was invited by Trout Unlimited to take part in the dam demoli-



The 1954 fish ladder collapsed under the pressure of torrential rains, combined with river built-up sediments

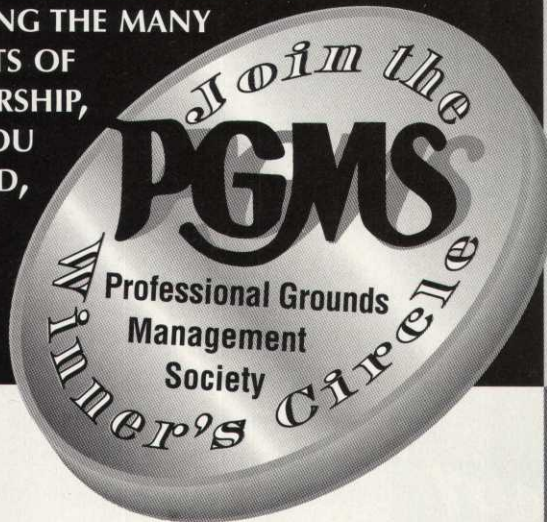
tion ceremonies at San Geronimo. Jackhammer in hand, Babbitt declared that attention be brought to the numerous dams linked across the Pacific coastline that act as “tombstones that rivers no longer need.”

“It was a team effort and it made sense that Evergreen be both active and supportive — in not only in recog-

nizing the problem — but in helping to create a solution,” says Tim McBride, Evergreen’s Western region managing director. “It was a public and private partnership with local activists and residents joining Evergreen in the donation of time, services and materials. Environmental groups and govern-

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mental agencies also contributed funds.”

The fish ladder was reconstructed in 1999. The cost of the project was more than \$150,000, and the ladder is entering its second migratory season. The future of the project and the ladder itself are being determined.

“I recognize that the integrity of this ladder is largely my responsibility,” Carrier says. “We conduct daily inspections of the pools to keep the area clear of debris and have implemented a low-impact management program that minimizes the chemical applications and helps protect the surface water quality of the creek.”

McBride says Evergreen is passionate about being environmentally responsible and proactive and will continue to demonstrate its commitment at San Geronimo. “Presently, we are working on the possibility of contributing the ladder to local organizations for the purpose of preservation and continuing education, McBride says.”

According to the participating agencies responsible for monitoring the fish, the question of whether construction of Roy’s Pools (so named to pay tribute to the original Roy’s Dam that had been destroyed) will have a long-term impact on the Coho population won’t be



ELENA BELSKY

The golf course crew, with the help of local environmental groups, constructed the framework for the new fish ladder.

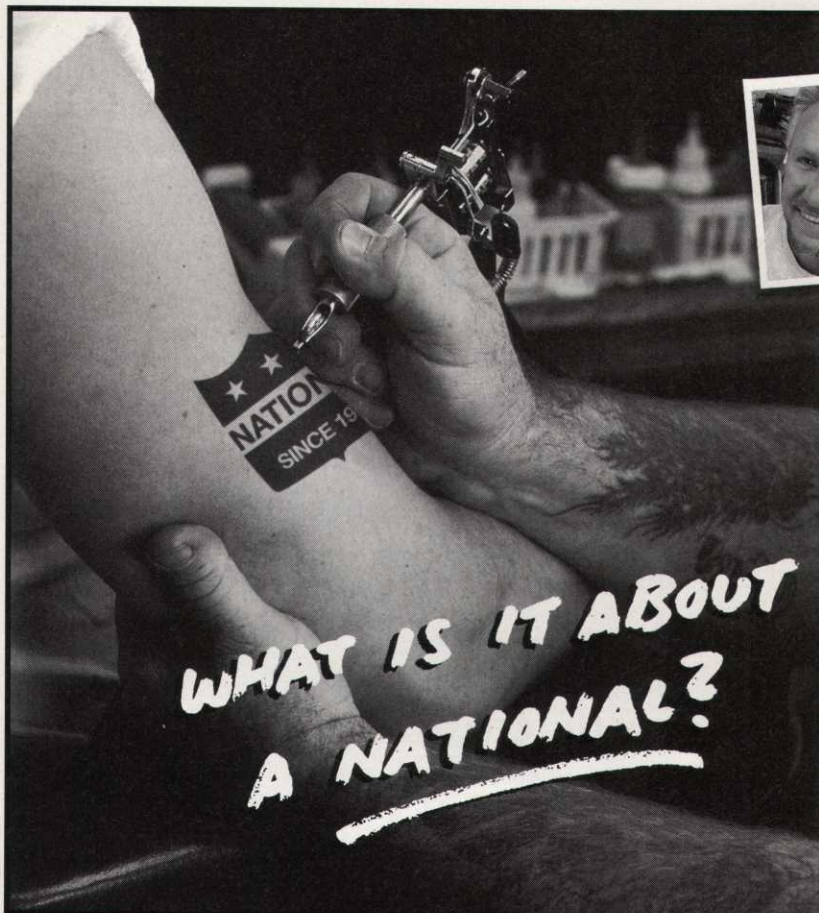
answered for years.

“I’m excited to be a part of this continuing project,” Carrier says. “It has been surprising to see how many people stop at the creek daily to look at the ladder — and the salmon aren’t even jumping. With the viewing location well out of reach of play, area residents and educational groups are assured that there

will be some form of observational area in the future.”

Auxer has one piece of advice for golfers who want to play San Geronimo — “Leave the fishing rod in your bag.” ■

Karen Olson, an environmental geologist, owns Karen R. Olson Consulting in Virginia, Minn.



Scott Wilke
Superintendent
Firethorne Golf Course
Lincoln, NE

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