

Putting Water Back

BY ERIC UNMACHT

On a recent summer morning, a small crowd gathered in a 1930s ranch house built on a riverside parcel in Ventura, California. They were there to discuss the health of the Ventura River, which flowed through the property and slowed in deep, shaded pools – that river was the reason a conservation group had recently bought the property and created a steelhead preserve.

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Standing in front of the room in creased, pleated khakis and a collared shirt, Mark Capelli spoke first. It had been 35 years since he first knocked on Patagonia's door. With photos of steelhead in hand, the young graduate-student had asked for support in his lone campaign to prove that the Ventura River was still alive. Patagonia gave him office space and a mailbox, and the story of Mark's victory over water- and land-developers became company lore – and inspiration for Patagonia's future grassroots giving.

Mark is now a biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, overseeing the recovery of California steelhead from San Francisco to the border of the United States and Mexico. As he clicked his way through a Powerpoint, it became clear that his victory wasn't the end of the story. Other development plans had come – and succeeded. The campaign Mark started in the 1970s continued, but the southern steelhead still battled extinction. As the crowd listened, someone mumbled about how depressing it all was. Another asked Mark whether he had seen any progress at all – and whether he thought the fish species could ultimately survive.

The reasons for slow progress on fish repopulation in the Ventura River are simple: Dams built in the middle of the 20th century to feed human development continue to hinder passage by fish, and have reduced water levels to a trickle in some areas – and to rocks and dirt in others.

While the reasons may be simple, solutions have been anything but. A complex system of water rights, parceled out over 100 years ago before the word ecosystem even existed, largely influences water policy around rivers. In past disputes over water in Ventura, city officials have claimed they possess “pueblo water rights” granted by Spanish settlers more than 200 years ago.

Mark's efforts to restore the river to its former, wild self have led to some victories, like fish ladders for endangered steelhead on the Robles Diversion Dam. Yet the dam's

owners have been suing the federal government for forcing them to release enough water to make the ladders usable.

The complexity of restoring water to rivers – and the immediate importance of doing so – is why Patagonia got involved with the Portland-based nonprofit Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF). As part of a new river

restoration program, BEF works with nonprofit organizations throughout the West to provide funding that enables large ranchers, farmers, irrigators and others to put water back into waterways for the sake of the environment – and their businesses.

BEF does this by selling BEF Water Restoration Certificates™ (WRCs). The revenue supports locally based groups that reach out to landowners and irrigation districts that find new ways to restore flow to dewatered streams and rivers. WRC project funding can help landowners upgrade inefficient irrigation infrastructure, use water more efficiently or fallow unproductive fields and dedicate water rights to parched streams. The rivers get 1,000 gallons of water for every \$1 in WRCs purchased.

Similar to carbon offsets, the rest of us can calculate our water footprints online and purchase WRCs to offset those amounts. Patagonia recently bought WRCs to restore eight million gallons of water for the Middle Deschutes River to offset its own domestic water consumption. Patagonia chose that river, near Bend, Oregon, given its popularity with anglers and kayakers. Like our own Ventura River, dams were also built 50 or 60 years ago to supply water and electricity for growing agricultural, industrial and residential development. Dams on the Deschutes severely altered natural river flows and blocked passage for steelhead and other migratory fish.

BEF is the first nonprofit organization to sell offsets that restore water to rivers, but carbon offsets have been around for a long time. Critics of this form of market-based environmentalism have argued that even the most legitimate offset projects distract consumers and lawmakers from working towards necessary policy changes, but we've found at Patagonia that change can take a long time – and often requires a combination of approaches. We've installed low-flow toilets and showerheads, as well as on-demand water faucets at our Ventura campus. We've also landscaped with native, drought-resistant plants, and have asked our supply

chain to join the bluesign® standard, which incorporates water conservation into its certification process. We recently launched a two-year environmental campaign, Our Common Waters, to promote water policy changes.

Yet we still have a water footprint and will likely have one well into the future. For that reason, we see WRCs

as another tool to restore our rivers, while we continue to reduce our footprint and lobby for policy change in Western states like California, where conditions make it difficult for BEF and other nonprofits like BEF to restore water through offsets.

Since BEF's local partner in the Deschutes River (Deschutes River Conservancy) began restoring water to the Middle Deschutes less than 10 years ago, fishermen on the river report a significant increase in trout populations, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife now monitors changes in habitat conditions and fish populations.

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After the presentations concluded at the house, the audience scrambled down a nearby trail to the river and across a makeshift bridge of fallen branches. They hoped to glimpse a young fish feeding or resting on its long journey to the ocean. Everyone took turns staring into an empty pool upstream before resigning themselves to small talk. Just as the conversation turned to how long the road was to river restoration, Mark Capelli walked up from behind them. His smile rippled through the crowd – he had just spotted several young steelhead feeding in a rocky pool.

ERIC UNMACHT is a managing editor at Patagonia and a graduate student in environmental management.

To learn more about how to purchase WRCs, go online to b-e-f.org. You can learn more about our current environmental campaign, Our Common Waters, at patagonia.com/ourcommonwaters.

