

The Ventura River: Will The Steelhead Ever Return?

By JOHN WEIGLE

Charles Price remembers his childhood on Ventura Avenue as a time of hiking by, fishing from, diving into or swimming in the Ventura River.

As a member of the Ventura County Fish and Game Commission, he has embarked on a project of bringing the river back to that state.

"We've lost a valuable resource, and I think we should restore it and rehabilitate it," he said.

"There's a lot of different kinds of people that would be interested in this river," he said. Fishermen, hikers, youngsters, school teachers and Avenue residents who have a recreation problem.

"They didn't have it when I grew up on the Avenue, because that (river) was our playground," he recalled.

Restoration of the river — or, at least, determining if it's possible — is a fish and game commission project which fits in well with a longtime dream of Price's, he said.

He has already conducted one hike along the riverbed between Foster Park and the river mouth, and he plans more in upcoming weeks for government officials and interested citizens.

He's trying to get people who make decisions which determine the river's future "to physically be on the river — to see it, to smell it, to feel it, and, if they dare, to taste it."

Tasting isn't recommended for most of the river below Foster Park. Citizens and their government agencies have made "a public sewer out of it," Price said.

In a recent hike, Price showed companions the Oak View Sanitary District sewer treatment plant discharging detergent foam into the river; the Shell Chemical plant, where several hikers detected a strong ammonia odor near a drain pipe; and the outlet of a Rock-lite drain, where a thick, gooey mud slid into the river.

Price remembers when steelhead came home to the river to spawn and attracted fishermen from miles around.



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The last run was in 1948, a dry year when the river mouth didn't break open to the sea and the fish couldn't make it back to their home grounds.

It was a great year for surf fishing around Hobo Jungle, he recalls, but adds:

"It was rather sad to see some of them coming up on the beach and laying their eggs in the sand like grunion."

That was the year which broke the fishing cycle.

"I would like to see river from Foster Park down," Price said. "It doesn't appear at this time to be feasible to carry it up farther."

Is it feasible to make a river for even that distance? After all, water needs have increased since 1948, Casitas Dam is holding back a large flow and people may not be thrilled about the idea of letting valuable water run down the river to the sea.

Price thinks it is, although he admits there are a lot of problems involved.

"What is involved in it? Cooperation, more than anything," Price said. Cooperation from government agencies, industries and potential new users of the river.

Some agencies have already expressed qualified support for the proposal, Price said.

"The lion's share of the water is being contained in Casitas," Price said. He hopes to convince Castias Municipal Water District that it could stabilize the level of the lake and still let out enough of the lake's inflow to make a living river.

Price isn't thinking of a roaring Mississippi, he added, but

of a series of pools interspersed with rapids.

He charges that up to now there has been "a general complete lack of concern for the welfare and well being of the river. I don't think too many people think of a river as a living entity, but it is."

Some pools along the river, especially north of Shell Chemical operations, contain life, Price and biologist Thor Wilsrud said. Below that area, the river is nearly dead.

"Population and industry have come hand in hand to do this," Price contends.

An initial reaction to Price's proposal has been that it would be impossible to drain Lake Casitas just to have a flowing river. "I couldn't agree more," Price said.

"I've observed water running continuously in the stream for the last five years" in varying amounts, Price said. Another 20 to 30 cubic feet per second would double the size of the stream and make life possible, he believes.

Service clubs and conservationists might want to plant trees along the river to provide shade for both the fish and the fishermen, he said.

Industries which have used the river for their own benefit may wish to help restore it, he added.

"I am looking for the day when a greater part of the concern and cost may be borne by some of our major industries and corporations," he said, quoting approvingly from a speech by David Rockefeller of Chase Manhattan Bank: "In my view the most successful companies, in the future, will be those that are creatively concerned not only with increasing the nation's wealth but also with enhancing the public's welfare."

"I see a tremendous value there. This would be one of the primary benefits of it," Price said.

If the Ventura River flow could be increased, if it could be stocked by the state and if the fish would start their own life cycle of going out to sea and returning, "we would have a unique tourist attraction in Southern California."

With at least 55 million fishermen in the country, such a stream would pull a lot of people to Ventura County, he said.

"How many miles, or feet, if you will, of open, running streams do you have that are accessible to the public?" Price wonders. If Ventura had another steelhead run, "We would have fishermen coming out of the woodwork from all over, including our own fishermen."

If something isn't done to protect the river, Price believes, Ventura will have "another Los Angeles River, which is a very narrow, cement-lined channel, which recreationally and esthetically, no one even cares to look at."

"Do the people of this area want to perform the same act upon their area, upon their city, or do they not?" Price asks. Responses he has had so far, he said, indicate "that people do not want this area paved and totally industrialized and commercialized."

But, he warned, "We are having the same thing happen in

our county — up to this point — that Los Angeles County has . . . Who wants to live in those places any more and why don't they want to live there?"

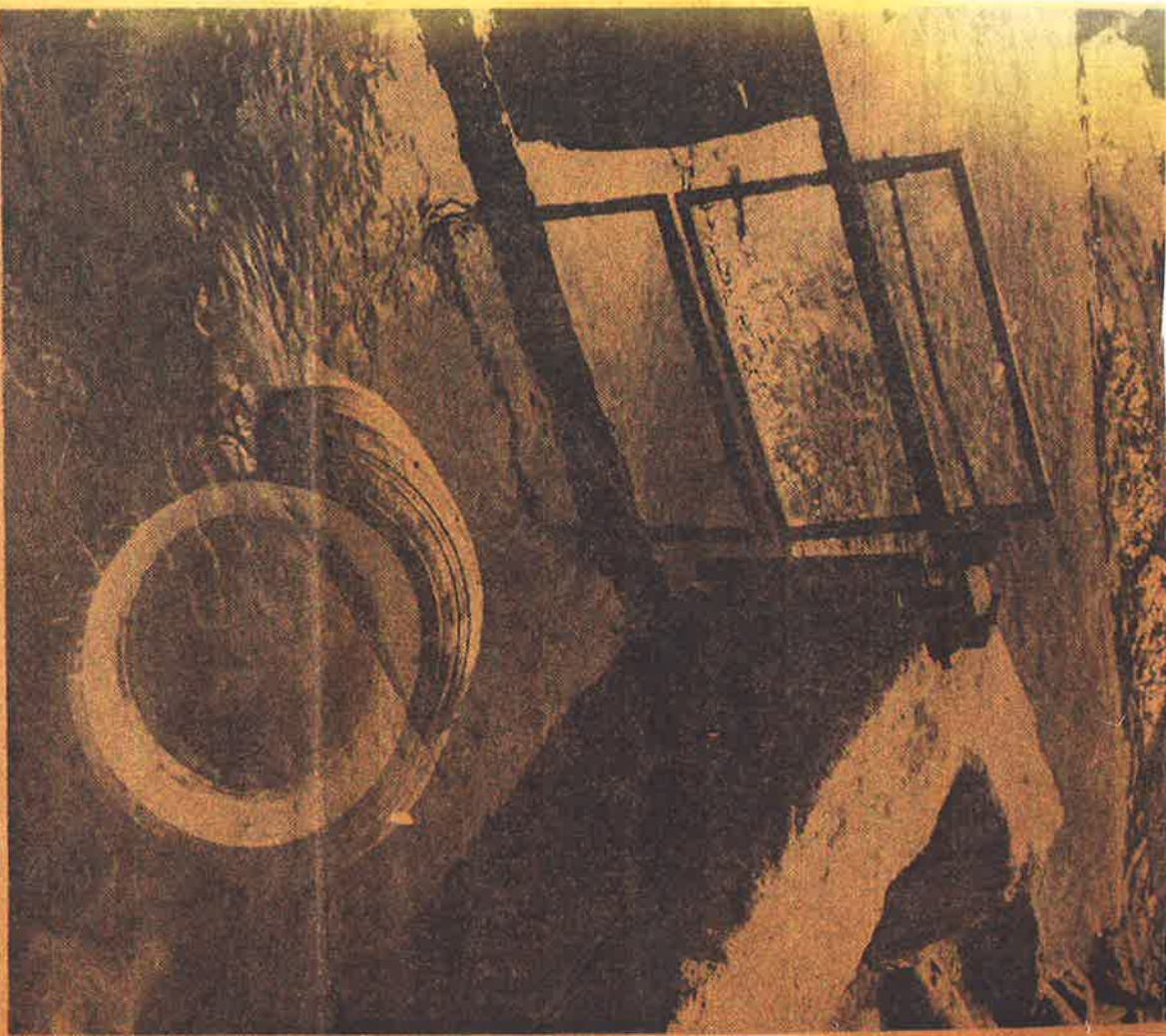
What about starting at the mouth of the river, where there is already a lagoon and water to work with?

That's a possibility, Price said, but it wouldn't do away with the need for work upstream.

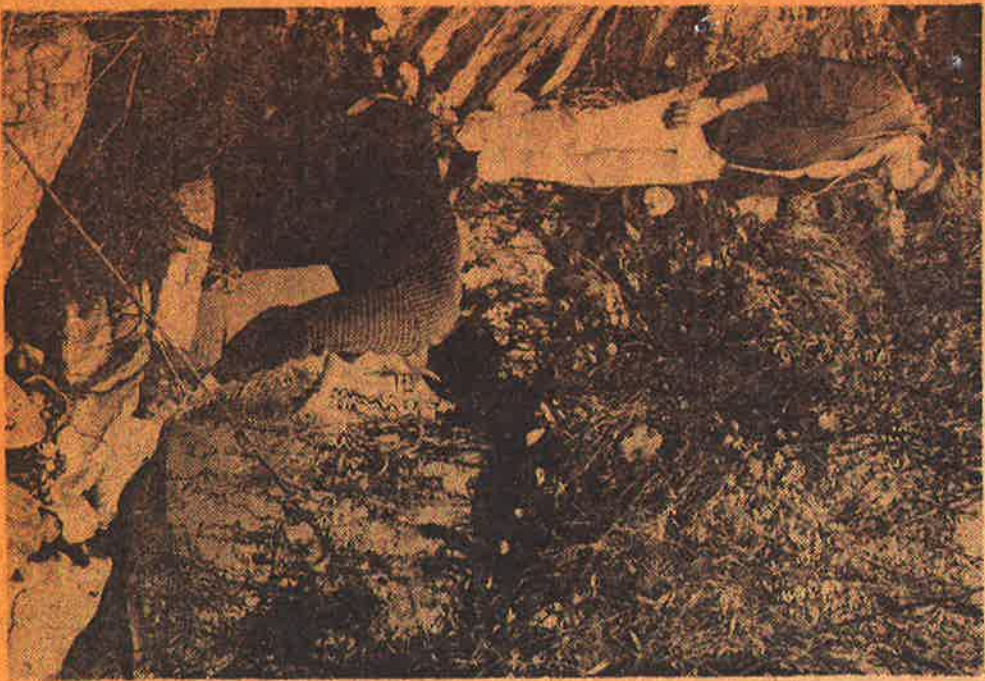
"You could certainly enhance some of the conditions of the lagoon now," Price said. But the water coming into the lagoon would have to be cleaned up.

"The conditions at the mouth of the river are the result of a lot of things that went on above the mouth of the river," he explained.

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The river has become a public sewer and dumping ground, believes river supporter Charles Price. The fire is trapped behind the dam — most of it underground — at Foster Park, which diverts the city's water supply from the river to the city.



Charles Price, standing, and Thor Willstrud, biologist, search for life in a Ventura River pool. They found some, but nothing that would give a trout fisherman much of a fight. Price believes the river could be restored. The return of fish would create new recreation area.

"I have to get a great number of people involved and a great variety of agencies and authorities," Price said. In addition to industries and landowners who use the river, there are many state, federal and local bodies which exercise control over it, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, city and county of Ventura, Ventura Regional County Sanitation District, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, State Resources Agency and others.

That's the purpose of the hikes.

It's also one reason Price, who works for Eastman Dillon, Union Securities & Co., Ventura, wants to hear from people who are interested in the project — either for it or against it.

He'd like to see a flood of letters to city councilmen, county supervisors and state legislators.

He also wants to see something happen soon.

"I would like to see, by this time next year, cleaner water in there and maybe a little bit more of it — and with some living things in it," he said.