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FOCUS: THE ENVIRONMENT



COURTESY OF CFI GLOBAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Shannon Skelton, CFI Global Fisheries Management founder and president, fishes a privately owned stretch of the Poudre River that the company restored last year.

## Restoring fish habitats with more than bulldozers

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FORT COLLINS – CFI Global Fisheries Management went from an idea rooted in recreation, preservation and science to a multimillion-dollar business that caters to celebrities and customers worldwide.

Aquatic biologist Shannon Skelton started his fish habitat rehab company in 1997 in Fort Collins with a \$1,500 computer he bought from his brother. Today, CFI Global employs seven people, including engineers, wetland scientists and ecologists.

All also happen to be devout fly anglers.

CFI Global restores streams, ponds and wetlands so that they can be healthy again. It has done this across the Rocky Mountains as well as in such far-flung locations as Patagonia, Ecuador and Dubai.

Its clients have included ranchers and farmers, celebrities and moguls, including professional golfer Greg Norman, businessman and philanthropist John Malone and Under Armour co-

founder Ryan Wood.

It was Norman who liked CFI Global's work on his ranch near Meeker so much that he invited the team to Dubai for another project.

Skelton's team specializes in turning a stream damaged by livestock overgrazing to an A+ fishery.

Cattle that spend a great deal of time near streams can strip grass from banks and cause erosion and poor water quality.

"Grandpa back in the 1940s used to be able to pull stringers of fish out of that," he said. "You'd be hard-pressed to do that nowadays."

After CFI Global finishes restoring damaged streams, fish tend to return to the waters. Trout move in search of quality habitat, and when they find a section that CFI Global has built, they tend to stay.

"For me, the world's perfect when that happens," Skelton said.

Brian Smith, a partner for ranch brokerage firm Hall and Hall in Steamboat Springs, said CFI Global rehabilitated a two-mile section of the Elk River on land owned by a member of his family.



COURTESY OF CFI GLOBAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

A CFI Global bulldozer moves rock in a stretch of the Elk River near Steamboat Springs that the company restored in 2008.

CFI Global "took it from an average stretch of river to one that actually fishes extremely well," Smith said. "One of the things I like about CFI is that the

end product is not something that looks really contrived."

"They tend to make it look like  
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Mother Nature could have done it," he said.

The 37-year-old Skelton, a former fly fishing guide for years, started the company after spending time fishing clients' streams that he felt needed rehabilitation. He borrowed the money for the computer.

CFI Global has seen substantial growth since the recession. It completed four projects in 2010. Since then, revenue has grown about 40 percent. (Skelton won't share exact revenues, but he says the company generates more than \$2 million annually.)

CFI Global currently is working on seven projects nationwide, including four in Colorado. Two are in Gunnison

and the others are in Pagosa Springs and Steamboat. The company also manages fisheries for clients such as homeowners' associations.

Before CFI Global begins changing the shape of a water body, employees intimately study its biological and hydrological characteristics for a year. Some competitors might study a stream only for one season, Skelton said.

Employees consider every bend in the stream, where to place rocks, what areas to dig pools and which kind of native plants and trees should live along its banks. It also studies what kinds of insects live in a particular area and how they can create optimal conditions for those species to thrive.

CFI Global employs sophisticated technology in its operations, including tools used for scientific analyses and Global Information Systems software.

"The level of detail that our company goes through and the data collection and engineering is more than any other firm that I know of," he said. "Ultimately, we're trying to build something that's going to sustain long after we're gone."

Other growth opportunities for the company have come from farmers and ranchers who have turned to it as their agricultural operations suffer from the drought. They want their streams upgraded to attract anglers, whom they could charge to fish.

The farmers still can let their cattle graze along the stream from time to time to prevent overgrowth.

Skelton expects additional business following the High Park Fire, which burned nearly 90,000 acres west of Fort Collins. Runoff from rains has sent ash into the river, blackening water and killing fish and the insects they eat.

"There's not much we can do about black water," he said. "(But) there's going to be a lot that's going to need to be done once that black water subsides and the fisheries are no longer there."