



North Forty News

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NORTHERN COLORADO'S WEEKLY INDEPENDENT LOCAL NEWS

Protecting the Ecosystem Recent Fires and Water Proposals Present New Challenges

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Shannon Skelton holding a Brown Trout in the Poudre River (Photo Courtesy Duncan Clark, Hayden Outdoors)

THE NEW

scene weekly

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Swallowtail Butterfly (Photo by Tim Van Schmidt)

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COVER

Sustainability in Colorado's Waterways, Amid Climate Change

ANNIE LINDGREN | NorthFortyNews.com

With images of fire, floods, and other natural disasters filling our news feeds, it is hard not to worry about the future. Many of us live in Colorado because we love this beautiful state and all of its resources. No matter what your recreation or lifestyle of choice is, there are opportunities throughout the year. Lately, though, smoke-filled air from the Cameron Peak Fire has kept us indoors and away from our favorite Northern Colorado recreational spaces.

Shannon Skelton, Wellington ranch owner, lifelong fisherman, and owner of Sweetwater Fisheries Group in downtown Wellington, has seen a lot of change over the last twenty-three years in Northern Colorado. Using a science-based, holistic, and stewardship minded approach, Shannon's company has restored 100's of miles of streams, 1000's of acres of lakes, ponds, and wetlands, creating healthier and more sustainable habitats for wildlife. Shannon knows the needs of our waterways well and shares an interesting perspective on a fire's role in nature and how humans have impacted our natural resources.

Shannon explains that all these fires burning in the Western states are part of a burn continuum that is a necessary element of the forests' cycle. Suppression happens when people are inhabiting these areas, and structures have to be protected. Dead trees that aren't able to burn naturally become fuel for future fires, and there has been a lot of accumulation. In Colorado, we have an abundance of dead trees due to beetle kill. Global warming has a role in that warmer temperatures create drier conditions, and warmer winters don't kill the insects destroying the trees.

Fire is good for the forests because it clears out the old and makes room for the new. When asked about waterways' impact, Shannon explained that ash and run-off would kill some fish, but it also cleanses the water. As things settle, the organic matter acts as fertilizer for new growth in the water and the forest.

Shannon made an interesting observation during the High Park fire. There is a species of cicada that emerges from the ground every 17 years. After the High Park fire in 2012, these cicadas emerged earlier than their expected due date in 2020. Fish eat cicadas, and more fish survived the fire run-off due to this unexpected food source. "The High Park fire was a big fire, damaged many homes and structures, and yet the Poudre River is the best it has ever been now, with phenomenal fishing as a result."

The forest and waterways will spring back to life after the Cameron Peak Fire runs its course, and we can witness the rejuvenation for years to come.

Fire and flood in terrain modified from what nature intended can cause significant problems for fish and wildlife habitat, just as it creates significant problems for the humans living there. Sweetwater Fisheries Group helps to restore the natural habitat after disaster sweeps through.

"Healthy and sustainable rivers, streams, lakes, and wetlands mean healthier ecosystems and foodchains. It also means better recreational opportunities," Shannon explains.

A natural disaster is not the only thing that impacts waterways' health; humans are an even more significant part of the problem. We need water for our homes, our



(Photo courtesy of Sweetwater Fisheries)

businesses, and our farmland, and as the population of Colorado continues to grow, as do our water needs. In a semi-arid region, water is short on supply. Municipalities are seeking new sources of water to sustain the growing demand. "If the Glade Reservoir Project happens, it is really going to change our fisheries and wildlife," notes Shannon.

As an environmentalist working hard to preserve our natural resources, Shannon can see the changes happening. There are a variety of Trout species in Colorado streams and rivers. Cutthroat Trout is the only native species, and there are hardly any left. "Many of our waterways are stressed, altered, and manufactured," Shannon explains. Some species of non-native fish in the water are overrunning the space, much like noxious weeds.

Farming practices have also harmed the streams and bodies of water that pass through the farmland. Cattle damage banks and add excessive amounts of phosphorus to the water, encouraging algae and weed growth. Fencing strategies, rotational grazing, and water tanks are effective ways of protecting natural water sources.

"We are trying to bring on a new light and approach to conservation and land management. We want to be a support for farmers and ranchers so that they can

manage their land and produce stellar crop or livestock, while also preserving fisheries that are on their properties," explains Shannon.

Why is protecting fish habitat so important? Because bodies of water with no fish in it become overgrown with algae and weeds. Fish are food for animals and humans, playing an essential role in the food chain. There is a recreational component, with many states depending on recreational spending for licensing and park entrance fees. Fishing gets people out to enjoy the great outdoors and carry on family traditions.

Sweetwater Fisheries Group has 23 years of experience helping people enhance and manage ecosystems on their land. Check out their website for more information on the work they do: sweetwaterfisheries.com.

As fire, heat, and extreme drought become a part of our new normal, doing what we can to take better care of our environment and ecosystems is essential in salvaging our natural resources in Colorado. Water is vital for sustainable life, in nature, and in our communities. As we feel the effects of water restrictions, smoke-filled air, and low water levels in our recreational spaces, it should sink in that this is no longer just a matter of protecting resources for generations to come.



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