

River King

ANGLER TURNS PASSION FOR WATER INTO GOLD



By David Light



Fifteen years ago when 23-year-old aquatic biologist Shannon Skelton decided to invest a borrowed \$1,500 into a laptop computer to start CFI Global Fisheries Management, today one of the preeminent stream restoration and fisheries enhancement firms in the country, most people thought he was crazy. But doubt did not detour young Skelton. He was too busy guiding anglers 200 days a year at exclusive commercial and private ranches in Colorado, Montana and Wyoming, studying the contrived techniques being used to keep waterways fish-rich, and blueprinting how he could use his science education and flyfishing background to improve the hydrology issues of streams and rivers without neglecting the biology.

It was tough rowing for a few years as Skelton and his wife laid the groundwork for CFI Global, but today the firm employs multiple engineers, wetland scientists, and ecologists and has restored, enhanced, or developed plans for more than 1,000 miles of stream and rivers, and 4,000 acres of lakes, ponds and wetlands for clients across the globe.

Human and agricultural practices have led to the degradation of many of the nation's fisheries, and Skelton is committed to reversing this trend. With preservation in mind and a proven technique, CFI Global is returning these precious resources into thriving fisheries.

Most CFI clients have mediocre or degraded rivers and streams that they want to convert into high-quality fisheries. They hire Skelton not just to discover, evaluate and enhance their waters, but also to develop land practice guidelines and irrigation/grazing strategies that ensure the

fisheries maintain a productive and thriving ecosystem.

"We develop an intimate relationship with the water, and in doing so the water ultimately tells us what it needs," said Skelton. "Every stream or pond has some limiting factors that can prevent it from living up to potential, so identifying and addressing those is key to getting the maximum out of any fishery."

Science comes first for CFI Global. Before even an ounce of dirt is moved on a project, the team of biologists and engineers studies the biological and hydrological makeup of a body of water for an extensive period of time, sometimes exceeding one year. Every bend and nook is considered and mapped via proprietary computer software that assists in deciding where to create pools, place rocks, plant native vegetation, and fashion optimal conditions for insects and macro invertebrates. CFI Global collects loads of quantitative data and photos before, during, and after a project is finished to ensure that both the insects and fish are flourishing.

"Early stream restoration practices were all about being pretty, and there was no emphasis on the long-term sustainability of a project," said Skelton. "We are the evolution of the industry, the 2.0 version if you will, and there is not another firm that invests as much time and energy into data collection and engineering as we do. Our ultimate goal is to perpetuate the legacy of the property."

Skelton has developed a reputation as one of the more holistic practitioners in the industry. He does not believe in creating an artificial



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environment that goes against the natural course of the water, nor does he consider a fishery restored if a landowner is required to pellet feed and seasonally stock the water with fish. Because of his unique approach, landowners are lining up for CFI Global's preservation-focused rehab work.

One of Skelton's specialties is converting streams damaged by livestock overgrazing into quality fisheries. New business opportunities have arisen as drought conditions in the Western United States have negatively impacted agriculture, causing ranchers to seek out other revenue streams, including attracting paying anglers. One of the more interesting trends developing in the world of ranch ownership is the relationship between agricultural land use and recreational sporting opportunities. There was a time in the not-too-distant past when agricultural practices and outdoor activities, fly fishing in particular, were at odds. The impact of wildfires also creates opportunities for CFI as hundreds of miles of world class fisheries have been severely damaged.

Many of today's stream rehabilitation jobs involve what Skelton refers to as "quick fixes," like dropping hefty boulders or creating rock structures across stream beds to control flows and create plunging pools for fish. Often those rocks are not native to the stream or region, but CFI tends to utilize more natural techniques to improve fish habitat, according

to Nathan Green, a regulatory project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers who has worked with Skelton on several fish-habitat improvement projects.

CFI Global is on the forefront of ranch enhancement and preservation in America. Its industry leading techniques and science-based approach to fisheries stewardship have made it the firm of choice amongst ranch managers, landowners, and developers nationwide.

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"When golfing legend Greg Norman was so pleased with a project we did on his Colorado ranch that he asked to bring us along for a major project in Dubai, I knew we had arrived," said Skelton.

When not working, fishing, or spending time with his family, Skelton is a devoted team roper. His team came in 4th at the 2011 Colorado Open Roping Championships, and he competes in several state and county events throughout the Rocky Mountains and the Midwest. He is also an avid bird hunter and dog trainer.

"I love the life I've chosen and am very proud of all that we've accomplished at CFI Global," said Skelton. "It thrills me that I was able to take my love for fishing and nature and turn it into a way to make good living, and I feel blessed to be able to say that my work makes the world a better place." ★

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