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BUSINESS

Healing waters

CFI Global wins praise with its science-first approach to restoring streams, lakes and wetlands. The proof is in the fish.



Shannon Skelton checks a rainbow trout he hooked along a stretch of Upper Bear Creek restored by his Fort Collins-based business, CFI Global. The stream was “a meandering disaster” before the slow, expensive process of making it healthy once again. Photos by John Prieto, *The Denver Post*

By Jason Blevins *The Denver Post*

EVERGREEN» Shannon Skelton gently drops his bead head wooly bugger atop the clear pool, and within seconds his fly rod bends under the pull of a cutbow trout.

“This is a classic example of perfect habitat. Remember, before we got here, the fish were 4 to 8 inches max,” says the aquatic biologist as he pulls a 20-inch flame-red trout from the depths of the pool on Upper Bear Creek on the flank of Mount Evans.

Five years ago, the creek was a turbid, shallow mess. Hay operations reached to the water. Decades of cattle grazing had eroded banks that washed away with each year’s runoff. The tepid trickle hosted sickly, non-native fish that rarely reached maturity.

“It was a meandering disaster,” said Dick Williams, a retired zoologist who a few years ago joined three other homeowners along the creek to hire Skelton and his CFI Global team to breathe new life into the ailing brook. “Two days ago I pulled a 24-inch rainbow out of a 13-foot pool.”

Skelton and his wife launched CFI Global in 1997 with a borrowed \$1,500. Today, their team of seven biologists — all of whom operate heavy machinery and can challenge Skelton’s formidable fly placement skills — has rehabilitated fish habitats for wealthy landowners across the Rocky Mountains as well as Dubai, Patagonia, Ecuador and Hawaii. Fort Collins-based CFI has restored more than 200 miles of stream and 4,000 acres of lakes, ponds and wetlands in the past 14 years.

Skelton, who coos his prey from the banks and kisses each trout he catches before slipping it back in the water, has developed a reputation as



After a year-long evaluation, CFI used 260 tons of gravel and rock to restore 4 miles of stream and banks along Upper Bear Creek. At a cost of \$250,000 to \$500,000 a mile, the “whole ecosystem changed.”

one of the more holistic fishery fixers in the country. Landowners — from municipalities to millionaires to developers — are lining up for his preservation-focused rehab work, which includes fishery management and consulting.

Still, his science-first approach requires convincing, particularly among the super wealthy whose checks typically cull instant results.

Skelton, for example, spends a year researching the riparian habitat before turning a stone.

CFI employs proprietary software that analyzes a year’s worth of data covering every aspect of a stream’s hydrology. In Upper Bear Creek, for example, his team graded the creek a D-plus before beginning a year-long evaluation. The final design — which required 260 tons of gravel and rock

and a cost somewhere between \$250,000 to \$500,000 a mile — has the 4 miles of stream winding through lush banks of dense native switchgrass and riffing over rocks into deep pools where giant trout spend their lifetime hiding under carpets of reedgrass and gobbling swarms of bugs.

“In one season, this whole ecosystem changed,” Williams said.

Many of today’s stream rehab projects involve what Skelton calls “quick fixes,” like dropping large boulders or 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.

“CFI tends to utilize more natural techniques to improve fish habitat,” said Nathan Green, a regulatory project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers who has worked with Skelton on several fish-habitat improvement projects.

Skelton crouches as he sneaks up on a pool hidden in waist-high fescue and switchgrass. Moments later a flash of red breaks the water as the rainbow fights on Skelton’s line.

“I can’t believe how well these fish have done here,” he said. “Oh, this guy is huge.”

That zeal for fish inspires landowners, Green said.

“Mr. Skelton has a clear passion for fish-habitat improvement and has changed the minds of particular landowners who would have likely implemented harder, rock-based habitat improvements,” Green said.

Jason Blevins: 303-954-1374
or jblevins@denverpost.com