



PRESERVING OUR

Fly Fishing

HERITAGE IN THE WEST

BY P. THOMAS ANDREWS

Growing up as an avid flyfisherman in the Rocky Mountains, I became familiar with many exceptional river and stream fisheries, frequently fishing the North Park area of Colorado. The Fall before last I decided to revisit one of these old haunts, to rekindle the electric brown-trout fishing I had experienced many years ago in my youth. I arrived on the ranch and parked in my same old spot, with great anticipation of the grassy-meadow stream I had remembered, then rigged up and waded into the low Fall streamflow. My day of flyfishing the Michigan River outside of Walden, Colorado began well, with memories of past fish flooding back with each cast, but steadily

became drearier as the day wore on. The weather didn't turn sour and I didn't fall in, but it was various events in the past that cast a gloom upon my day of leisure.

The river I had enjoyed fishing, and that had fished well in the past, was nearly lifeless. No trout rose in the murky, slow water, and only suckers and dace scurried ahead of me in the uniformly shallow channel. The banks I'd plopped myself down upon only a couple of decades ago had caved in, and with every step downstream a puff of what was left of them arose from the once-clean river bottom. The river had widened to the point where it was only a few inches deep in many spots, re-

depositing the eroded banks into my favorite low-water holes and pools. Indeed, things had changed in the years since I fished this river.

The land practices employed on this working cattle and hay ranch were finally exhibiting their inevitable effects, degrading the river that ribboned through it. The aggressive cattle grazing approach, permitted on the delicate stream corridor, had been steadily loosening the banks and removing crucial vegetation. This allowed the river's power to cut and erode the banks, producing what I saw before me: Wide channels, shallow depths, mucky bottoms. I was not completely disheartened, even after taking measure of the sterility of this once-

great fishery. I knew that this exact stretch of river was scheduled for a facelift, make that a whole body-off restoration, and that within the next couple of seasons it would hopefully fish better than ever.

My confidence in the future of this fishery came by way of Shannon Skelton, the owner of the company that would ultimately restore these two miles of river.

CFI - Global Fisheries Management is a full service fisheries consulting and management firm, and specializes in enhancing and managing streams and lakes around the world. “That reach had so much potential, but obviously needed some assistance,” Shannon said, at his Fort Collins, Colorado based office. “There were serious habitat deficiencies, and critical forage issues we had to address.”

The issues were not irreversible, as I had thought. CFI biologist Jay Robinson added: “Our Ranch lands of the West are not forever changed for the worse. Rather, they are a canvas ripe for rejuvenating and restoring, for enhancing and replenishing.”

CFI is on the forefront of Ranch Enhancement and Preservation in America. Their industry leading techniques and science-based approach to fisheries stewardship have made them the firm of choice amongst ranch managers, landowners, and developers nationwide. This company takes all the steps necessary to properly assess and understand each unique fishery system, before prescribing a treatment or enhancement. “We develop an intimate relationship with the river, and in doing so the river ultimately tells us what it needs,” stated Skelton. “Every stream or pond has some limiting factors that can prevent them from living up to potential, so identifying and addressing those factors is key to getting the maximum out of any fishery.”

CFI, being a scientific firm with many roots in



Before CFI enhanced this stream, the degradation was evident: a wide and shallow channel along with slow, featureless flows.





Evidence of recruiting capabilities of the recently restored habitat.

the fly fishing industry, is committed to creating a fishery that not only is productive and functional, but aesthetically pleasing as well. They know that working with the manager and/or landowner, to determine the goals and expectations of the fishery and land, is essential to realizing the potential of any fishery or ecosystem.

“Historical human and agricultural influences along river systems have resulted in bank degradation and nutrient loading in these associated systems, negatively impacting many once-great fisheries.” Robinson said, reiterating what I had seen that day in North Park. “But through proper stewardship and design, these impacted areas can become thriving fisheries once again.”

New investors, like the one who acquired the ranch I was fishing on, are recognizing the real benefit to having an exceptional fishery on their land. As it turns out its actually development, through investing in protecting and enhancing ranch resources, that can prove to be extremely

beneficial to struggling fisheries. A new generation of Ranch Managers and Developers are taking a proactive approach to reverse some of these negative effects on the land they manage. These forward-minded ranch conservationists are increasingly enlisting the aid of the experts at CFI, teaming up to properly steward and enhance the land and its associated fisheries, and are seeing huge returns.

The river that I had seen in such bad shape a couple of seasons ago is now a remarkable fishery, supporting outstanding populations of strong and healthy trout. CFI had studied the stream, listened

to what it needed, and corrected the problems that were killing the fishery. The bottom was clean again with proper hydraulics restored, the pools were deep like they used to be, and the banks were stabilized with natural materials and unobtrusive structures. I revisited that river after the rehabilitation had taken place, and truly understood what Jay was saying about a troubled stream being a “canvas for enhancement.” CFI had painted a picture that was beautiful for a fisherman to see, that Mother Nature could appreciate, and that truly preserved the beauty and integrity of this western fishery. ❖



Re-established banks creating natural stream sinuosity and proper pool to riffle ratios.



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