Before and after photos of the Blue River Restoration Project immediately upstream of the I-70 bridge. Silverthorn, Colorado.

Business Profile

Ecological Resource Consultants Prove, "If You Build It (Or Improve It), They Will Fish"

For years, the real estate world has been driven by an adage that the three things that matter most are location, location, and location.

As for fly fishing (or all fishing, for that matter) the long-term success of any body of water, in terms of its ecological viability and/or, (dare I say it) economic value—sport fishery, commercial fishery, whatever—can be boiled down to a similar mantra. When all is said and done, its about habitat, habitat, and habitat.

There are arguably few species so revered by fly anglers, and yet so susceptible to the devastating effects of ruined habitat, than trout and salmon. But some of us are just now waking up as to the habitat protection efforts that can and should be applied in order to keep us all in business, 20 years down the road.

Interestingly, most of the habitat-driven efforts in the fly/trout world right now revolve around protecting the God-given public resources we collectively enjoy. Enlisting on behalf of these causes to save and preserve public trout habitat is a darn good thing, for the retailer, the manufacturer, the guide, and otherwise.

But there's also an aspect of habitat cultivation that has been woefully under-tapped by both public and private interests. The truth is, it's possible to take a trout-unfriendly environment, make some changes, and create a fly fishery. More likely, it is possible to take marginal water, and make a great fishery. And that's exactly what Ecological Resource Consultants (ERC), an Evergreen and Boulder, Colorado-based consulting firm does.

ERC is quick to point out, however, that there's far more to stream restoration and improvement than dropping a few rocks in the river and using a backhoe to dig deep pools.

"We think it's important to use a multidisciplinary approach," explained Dave Blauch, an ERC vice president and its senior ecologist. "Part of habitat restoration and enhancement is engineering based, understanding hydrology, how water moves and how currents are shaped. The other aspect, of course, is understanding the biology in a given river. Every watershed has attributes and challenges. We put ecological and water resource engineering together to create an ideal fishery."

As such, Blauch, who holds an environmental resource management degree from Penn State, works collaboratively with Troy Thompson, who studied civil engineering at Cornell, as well as the other several member of the ERC team, each of whom has a specific expertise to apply in the company's mosaic, multidisciplinary approach.

"It's also important for us that our work appears and functions naturally," added Blauch. "We don't think good stream work should look like Disney World. When we walk away from a project, the best result is when people realize a great fishery, but don't see any glaring signs that we were even there."

There are a wide range of issues that threaten fisheries, among the most common are mining, channelization, and the impact of livestock. Those issues can be mitigated, however, and a trout fishery restored or improved if there are key ingredients—moving water, trout friendly water temperatures (below 70 degrees Fahrenheit), natural structure like rocks and gravel bottoms, etc.

The North Fork of Colorado's South Platte River, for example, has been impacted by all of these issues. Perhaps more profoundly, this river is a water supply artery to Denver, drawing flows from Dillon Reservoir by way of the Roberts Tunnel, which cuts eastward through the

Continental Divide. As such, flows on this river are turned up and down by Denver Water, based on usage demands. These flows can cover a vast range, from a mere trickle when Denver Water closes the tunnel, to raging torrents when demands spike in metro Denver.

That said, this stretch of river is also a popular fishing corridor, home to a number of commercial ranch operations, and private fishing clubs. ERC helped Boxwood Gulch Ranch in Shawnee, and The Perfect Drift Club in Pine, optimize the waterways on those properties.

"We used to have a 'sweet spot' flow for good fly fishing that was between 100 and 300 cfs, but after we worked with ERC on our stream improvement, the fishing has been great when the river flows anywhere from 50 to 600 cfs," said David Hill, a Perfect Drift member. "When the flows go up, we find the fish moving laterally within the river, rather than flushing downstream. Our fish are holding over from season to season, and the fishing gets better and better as the trout grow and stay healthy."

The process ERC follows when working with clients (which include municipalities like Telluride, Montrose, Minturn, and Silverthorne in Colorado, as well as private landowners) is fairly straightforward: The ERC team assesses a client's goals, conducts an initial baseline evaluation of limiting factors and opportunities, develops a plan with cost projections, navigates the red tape to obtain all the permits, implements a construction phase, then follows up with monitoring and maintenance as necessary.

In most cases, the cost invested in a stream improvement is usually earned back in terms of increased angler usage. That means tourist dollars, customer revenues, and fly shop sales. For towns like Minturn, an investment of roughly $2 million is already paying dividends.

"The stretch of the Eagle River used to have red rocks and no fish due to the mining in the area," explained Jay Brunvand of the Town of Minturn. "But now it's turned into a spectacular fishery. ERC was incredible to work with. And the efforts they poured into the project helped us develop a huge community asset."

In Telluride, the San Miguel River flows through one of the most visually stunning valley floors in North America. But due to the impact of mining in the region, the river suffered, especially in the stretches closer to town (and the mines). Now, this is one of the most productive freestone fisheries in the San Juan Mountains.

"The fishing has been great in the Valley Floor area in recent years," said Tom Craddock, co-owner of Telluride Angler. "It's such a great asset for a shop to have productive water so close to town. We can send people out there for an hour or two, and know they'll find fish."

Interestingly, a lot of the projects ERC is focusing on going forward are "re-dos" of stream improvement projects completed years ago, which are now failing, both structurally, and ecologically.

"It really is an evolving science," described Blauch. "Years ago, people thought they could make a river fish better by sticking a rock here and a rock there, but over time, we've seen that it really doesn't work that way. And in fact, as some of that old original work is failing, it's creating a need for us to go in, and use a multidiscipline approach to improve the river in a way that will last for many years."

In that light, you don't have to own a river to have a vested interest in stream improvement done right. In fact, guides, shop owners, even the casual traveling angler, has a right, maybe even obligation to weigh in on these matters.

For more information on Ecological Resource Consultants, Inc. and the various projects they've worked on in Colorado and elsewhere, visit www.erccolorado.net. If you've fished a number of the best rivers in Colorado, odds are that you've experienced their work.

But you probably didn't see any signs that ERC was there.

-Kirk Deeter