

Learning from Yesterdays Mistakes to Avoid Tomorrows Tragedies

– MARCH 2, 2015

Though humans have lived along the bountiful shores and rivers of the far North Coast for tens of thousands of years, the span of our now-dominant civilization's history here has only begun to exceed a century and a half.

Looking particularly at the environmental history of the Eel River, it's striking that some of the most significant events in even this brief 150 years happened a century ago and half a century ago. If we hope to see our great river restored to even a semblance of the productivity our predecessors found only seven generations ago, we'd do well to consider not just the consequences of those fragments of history, but the choices we need to make today and tomorrow so that fifty, a hundred, and a hundred and fifty years from now, our descendants can continue to treasure the river that yields them such rich rewards.



Cape Horn dam, completed in 1914. Photo: Scott Greacen.

Before its transformation began toward the end of the 19th century, the Eel River likely saw a million adult salmon and steelhead in an average year. That the river was named for its apparently equally evident lamprey—an even richer prize for man and animal alike—sketches at least an outline of the river's productivity.

Most of the harms man has done the natural world are relatively tiny wounds. We can inflict great damage, as much by our own numbers and the terrible power of our tools as from our collective inability to appreciate the implications of all those individual actions piled up atop one another over time. Still, there are times and places when we can safely say that a specific action yielded consequences quite significant enough to be reckoned even a century later.

It was a century ago, in the fall of 1914, that the ceremonial final spike was driven to hold rail to tie, and the first train of Northwestern Pacific Railroad steamed down a hundred and fifty miles of the mainstem Eel River. That trainful of dignitaries were marooned overnight at the ceremony site, however, while the first of uncounted landslides was cleared from the newly laid tracks.

The consequences of that construction are yet to be fully reckoned, but would surely begin with old-timers' observations that even as the line was under construction, floods they had already seen came higher than the tracks in many places. Such a reckoning might assess not just the toes of earthflows pitched into the river to make way for the tracks, but also the inevitable resulting landslides. It would tally trains derailed into the river and never recovered, and toxic waste sites still lingering on the river's banks. Perhaps if we do prevail in our challenge to the North Coast Railroad Authority's studied indifference to the potential impacts of rebuilding the same railroad in the same way on the same ground in this century, we'll see some beginning of that reckoning in the first real review of the environmental impacts of that half-wrecked line.

It was also in 1914 that the Cape Horn dam was completed, and began to divert much of the upper mainstem Eel River's flow into a tunnel drilled through the ridge to the south, down to Potter Valley and the East Branch of the Russian River. The inadequacy of the new dam was almost immediately evident, as it quickly silted up, leading to the 1925 construction of the Scott Dam a dozen miles upstream, to impound the Pillsbury reservoir for the benefit of Potter Valley farmers. Just as with the railroad, we've never really counted the costs those dams have imposed on the river and downstream communities.

A first hard look at the dams' impacts on the Eel River's fish finally happened at the end of the twentieth century, after chinook, coho, and steelhead were all listed under the federal Endangered Species Act as threatened with extinction. But that partial reckoning is long overdue for an update. It's time to ask whether those dams should be left in place. The two dams and diversion tunnel of the Potter Valley Project face a 2022 deadline for federal relicensing.

Of course, the great event of fifty years ago—the Christmas Flood of 1964—was no human act. Yet the tremendous damage the flood did to the rivers' habitats and productivity were very much the consequence of human actions. The river had seen such flows again and again in previous ages. This time, however, the landscape came unraveled because it had been stripped by internal combustion chained to saw and track. Roads and clearcuts had ripped loose the seams of the land, and when the deluge came, the river burst her garments altogether.

What can we learn from these soundings in our river's history? That what is now is not what has always been, or what will likely be, surely. That the dreadful 20th century's harms can heal, if we look ahead for another fifty, hundred, hundred and fifty years to the place this river can be again, and ask ourselves what we need to see done today to get there.

We can't ever go back. But we can, and we must, learn history's lessons if we hope to keep moving forward in a way that's good for people, for fish, for the river and her forests.