



Connecting the Drops

Transcript: Recovering the Big Thompson and its Economy

December 2016

3 years ago, flood waters rushed down the Big Thompson River through Estes Park and eastward to Loveland destroying whole stretches of the river channel and adjoining roads. That flood echoed a similar one 40 years ago that killed 144 people, destroyed countless homes and decimated the river bed. Now, roads are being repaired and the eco-system is slowly recovering, and that recovery is crucial for the economy of local communities.

Benjamin Swigle is an Aquatic Biologist with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. He's giving some last minute safety reminders to his team, which is about to start the annual fish count on the Big Thompson.

That old adage of not mixing water and electricity doesn't apply here. The fish count team walks through the water with electrodes that emit a small electric charge...not enough to kill the fish...just enough to stun them so they can be scooped up for the fish count.

"What we're indirectly measuring through the trout is how much bug life is going on, if there's enough food in there. Availability of clean gravel, essential for reproduction."

Every fall, biologists count the fish to get an overall view of the river's health. A healthy river means a lot of healthy fish...trout in this case, rainbow and brown. And a healthy fish population means a healthy local economy with jobs dependent on the fishing and recreation industry. Jack Deloose knows all about that...he has been a fishing guide in Estes Park for 4 years.

"We get an awful lot of people, we'll probably end up with 600 people that will fish with us this year. People come to Estes Park for a lot of reasons and fishing is one of them."

An estimated 50,000 anglers descend on this area annually spending on average \$103 each on everything from fishing guides and equipment to lodging and food. On this fall morning, Jeff Anderson from Austin Texas is enjoying a day's angling on the Big Thompson with his wife Elizabeth. The couple enjoy bass fishing at home and decided to try their hand with the trout while visiting Estes Park.

"We're here for many things, one of them just so happened to be fishing. We saw that it was available here and a beautiful creek and that's why we're doing it."

About \$4million a year flows into local coffers as a result of this river. As so much tourism depends on the fish, the results of the annual fish count are closely watched.

The biologists conduct the count at two separate sites. This area is in good shape. There are shallow spots where the fish like to spawn, and rock pools for winter habitat. Further downstream, it's a different story.

Immediately after the 2013 flood the fish population there was zero. It slowly recovered but a concrete spill into the water earlier this year during road repairs set the recovery back.

Permanent repairs have begun on the parts of the river and adjoining highway that were most damaged by the floods, but Swigle says the repairs will also tackle problems dating back 40 years.

"We've been educated from 2 floods, 1976 and 2013 and in both cases the flood won and the river lost and now we're building a road that is resilient in the face of flooding so when it happens again and it will, we won't have to spend \$500 million to repair the road."

Raising the adjoining road and creating a wider floodplain will help this river cope with future floods.

After collecting the fish, the task of counting, weighing and measuring them begins. The number of fish in this stretch amounts to almost 4,000 total per mile, indicating a healthy section of the river. Further downstream, as was predicted, the fish count is much lower, in the low hundreds of fish per mile. But Swigle is hopeful that those numbers will improve in the future.

"Ultimately we'd like to see the number of trout that we found here, downstream in the same abundance."

Repairs on that lower stretch started in October and will likely continue through June 2017. It's a multi million dollar project, but it will be money well spent for the local economy if it means more river to fish in and recreate on.