

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

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Cutthroat trout on the Flathead Indian Reservation, Part 2

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Today, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (Tribes) are working to protect and enhance remaining cutthroat trout populations on the reservation. The Tribes have a long-term goal, where possible, of restoring cutthroat trout to some of their former habitats. Working toward this goal will require a number of actions aimed at conserving and enhancing remaining cutthroat trout populations and restoring fish to previously occupied habitats.

A first priority is to protect existing westslope cutthroat trout populations from going extinct, particularly from threats posed by introduced species. This will require using a variety of strategies to isolate remaining westslope cutthroat trout populations and protect them from being invaded by nonnative fishes, such as brook trout, and especially rainbow trout, which cross with and cause the loss of native westslope cutthroat trout. To prevent invasions the tribes may have to construct barriers. These barriers could range from something as simple as perching a culvert at a road crossing to more elaborate structures similar to small dams constructed directly in stream channels. Another strategy that could be employed would be to directly remove introduced fishes in waters connected to streams that currently support or once had westslope cutthroat trout populations. These fish could be removed using either electrofishing, a common sampling tool used by the Tribes' Fisheries Program, or piscicides, such as rotenone and antimycin. Both of these organic substances, when used correctly, are a safe and effective way of removing introduced fish and restoring westslope cutthroat trout. Both compounds have been widely used throughout the west on cutthroat trout restoration projects. Rotenone is derived from the roots of a South American plant and has long been used by native South American peoples to kill fishes for food. Antimycin is derived from a species of bacteria and was first used as an antifungal treatment for plants, but was later discovered to be an effective fish toxicant.

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Most of the remaining populations are vulnerable to extinction from human-caused habitat degradation such as poorly managed logging or grazing, or big disturbance events, such as large-scale wildfires. They are vulnerable for two reasons: first, the fish are isolated in small streams and second, we have lost the migratory life-history form of cutthroat trout. So, once one of these small streams loses its population, cutthroat trout from neighboring streams cannot repopulate it as they once could have. To buffer against extinction events, the Tribes are trying to maintain high densities of fish in these populations by restoring and maintaining healthy stream and riparian habitats and minimum instream flows, enforcing harvest restrictions, and installing fish screens at irrigation diversions to prevent fish from being lost into canals.

The Tribes will also be attempting to restore fish into some streams that were historically occupied. Restoring fish to these former habitats offers the greatest opportunity for increasing the distribution and abundance of cutthroat trout on the Reservation. Unfortunately, most Reservation streams that once supported native cutthroat trout now support introduced species such as rainbow, brook, and brown trout. Those non-native trouts would have to be removed from some of the streams before cutthroat trout can be reintroduced. Piscicides are the most effective means for removing introduced fishes, but electrofishing can also be effective in smaller streams that lack habitat complexity. Once introduced fish are removed from a stream segment, new cutthroat trout populations could be established using fish or fertilized eggs and remote instream incubators from donor streams where pure populations of cutthroat trout still exist.

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