Cutthroat Trout Restoration

The Stehekin River is the largest tributary to Lake Chelan and once supported a prolific and distinctive population of native fish species. These populations have been decimated during the past century due to overharvest by hatcheries and sport fishermen, and the introduction of invasive trout species such as the brook trout, lake trout, and rainbow trout. In the century since the publication of the New York Times article (at left), bull trout have been extirpated from the Chelan system, and westslope cutthroat trout populations have largely been pushed from the mainstem Stehekin River into the smaller tributary streams due to the highly competitive introduced rainbow trout.

In 2009, in consultation with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife ceased stocking sexually viable rainbow trout in Lake Chelan and began the process of reestablishing westslope cutthroat trout populations through its annual stocking program.

The U.S. Forest Service and North Cascades National Park are currently monitoring this effort through annual stream surveys aimed at documenting cutthroat trout spawning. Beginning in 2009, North Cascades National Park has conducted annual surveys on selected reaches in the lower Stehekin River. To date no cutthroat trout have been documented in the index reaches, but anecdotal evidence from local fisherfolk has indicated large cutthroat, up to 20” have been caught recently in the lower reaches of the river.

In 2011, park biologists plan to expand these efforts to document westslope cutthroat trout by conducting additional snorkel surveys within the mainstem of the Stehekin River in the spring and fall. Additionally, biologists will conduct electrofishing surveys in the autumn to collect DNA samples from newly hatched trout fry. These genetic samples will allow researchers to determine if successful spawning has occurred within the subject reaches.

Contact:
Hugh_Anthony@nps.gov
Reed_Glesne@nps.gov