River gets a fishing facelift



The Saluda River shows signs of improvement for fish habitat after large rock formations were added creating spillways and eddies. Fisherman Chris Campana from Simpsonville says he likes what he sees. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

A NEW SOUTH SALUDA

Anglers enjoy new fish holes, but some residents point to slimy silt

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CLEVELAND — Fall color frames the South Saluda River as Dan Rankin, a state fisheries biologist, points out a small rapids going over a V-shaped wedge of rocks. Two fish momentarily appear in a pool below the swirling water.

The golden leaves are gifts of nature. The rocks were recently put in the river by man and machine.

The controversial rock vanes are now in place on the South Saluda, rippling more than water in a community that remains divided over the $104,000 project to enhance trout habitat.

Funding came through the Natural Resource Conservation Service and private gifts.

"It seems to be a bit nicer," said angler Chris Campana of Simpsonville, who caught several brown trout on his first visit to the river since the project was completed.

"It looks real good now," said Todd Harris of Berea, who also was fishing on the river for the first time since the work was done and said he likes the "dark holes with swift current," because that's what fish like.



SUZIE RIDDLE/Staff

Conservationists say the rock structures will provide protected places for fish to hide and lay

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eggs in the hatchery-supported trout stream. Downstream residents say they've been left with green slime that wasn't there before and former fish habitat has been destroyed.

"The rock vanes have already begun to do what they were supposed to do—having formed very attractive knee- to waist-deep pools already," Rankin said.

"Now we have this slimy green silt on our property, coating the river downstream, and it used to be a clear pebble finish," said Lib Tickle, who lives downstream.

"The fish used to hang out where the roots of trees went into the water along the banks. Now they've filled that in with rocks and sand."

Dianne Culbertson, who, along with Naturaland Trust, owns property on the stretch of river near State 11 where the rocks were placed, said the river is more beautiful and clearer "than I've ever seen it."

The rocks "channel the water to the center" and "look very natural," Culbertson said. And trees along the banks are better off "because water no longer flows under their roots undermining them," she said.

The project is "going to be good for the river and for the state and for tourism," Culbertson said.



Dan Rankin, fisheries biologist, says rock veins formed "very attractive" pools. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

A recent Southwick and Associates study indicates that recreational trout fishing has an estimated $12 million to $18 million dollar annual impact in South Carolina, Rankin said.

Downstream from the project, water moves slowly through long straight and shallow stretches and the river takes on a darker hue that Rankin attributes to slower movement of water that allows more sediment to fall out.

This is what the project area looked like before the rock vanes were put in, he said.

This is state Department of Natural Resources property, and there are preliminary plans to extend the project through a federal Sport Fish Restoration grant, Rankin said.

Past the state property, Tickle and others are angry over the outcome of the project they tried to block until an administrative law judge ruled against them.

The residents feared it would result in increased flooding, sedimentation and erosion.

"The sedimentation is all over our downstream property. There's no doubt about that. The flooding we will have to wait and see. The erosion I am very concerned about," Tickle said.

Brenda Brooks, who also lives downstream, said a slime-covered mound of sand has formed in the river by her property that wasn't there before.

Tickle and Brooks said residents were told there would be no heavy equipment in the river and the work would be done from the banks, yet a track hoe sat in the channel churning mud for a month.

Rankin said he knows of no reason that the work would have caused green slime downstream. It could be due to the severe drought, he said.

"The flow in the South Saluda is exceedingly low" due to drought and additional water is siphoned off upstream for municipal use, exacerbating the low flow. It's "not uncommon" to see algae in slow-moving river beds in drought, he said.

There were few pools prior to the work and none were eliminated to create new ones, Rankin said. A new fish survey found more fish and more species present in that stretch of river already, just in the few weeks since the work was done, he said.

The rock vanes force water to the center of the river to prevent bank erosion, and rutty red clay access roads and mud bogs along the banks have been blocked off to traffic and planted with grass. They're green and stable and no longer contributing silt to the river as before, Rankin said.

John Tynan, deputy director of Upstate Forever, a project partner, said the community "was well aware" that the track hoe would be in the river and great care was taken to minimize any disturbance.

"In images I saw, water 100 yards downstream from where they were working was crystal clear," Tynan said. Disturbed areas on the banks "were immediately seeded and hayed so there would be minimal sediment exposed that could run off into the river."

Culbertson said the river is healthier now.

"There are about 10 groups in support of this, and they care deeply about the animals and about the water and the air and the environment, and they would never do a project that would be harmful to those things," Culbertson said.