

Court Victory Upholds Endangered Species Protections For Southern Steelhead, A Cultural Keystone Of The Utom River

Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation celebrates a ruling that defends state protections for Isha'kowoch, helping safeguard the future of the region's sacred waters

VENTURA, CA, UNITED STATES, July 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Last month, the [Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation](#) celebrated a Los Angeles County

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Mati Waiya

Superior Court ruling (United Water Conservation District v. California Fish and Game Commission, No. 25STCP01671) that upholds California's endangered species protections for the Southern California steelhead, rejecting a legal challenge brought by a regional water agency. Wishtoyo, alongside California Trout and the Center for Biological Diversity, intervened in the lawsuit to defend critical protections designed to save this culturally significant fish from extinction.

The court's decision affirms the California Fish and Game Commission's designation of the Southern California steelhead (known to the Chumash people as Isha'kowoch) as an endangered species. The United Water Conservation District had challenged that listing, the latest in a years-long effort to roll back safeguards for a fish whose survival is deeply tied to the health of the region's rivers and to Chumash cultural heritage.

"My inspiration for cultural and ecological restoration began in my youth as I observed steelhead runs through Sa'aqtik'oy," said Mati Waiya, founder and executive director of the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation. "This victory for Isha'kowoch is a major step towards the recovery of the very heart of our sacred rivers. We will not stop the fight until this cultural keystone species is fully recovered."

For the Chumash people, Isha'kowoch is far more than just a fish. For countless generations, its return to the rivers coincided with the rhythm of the seasons and symbolized the health of the waters that sustained Chumash villages, ceremonies, and food ways. The steelhead's journey from mountain streams to the ocean and back mirrors the Chumash understanding of the world as a web of relationships, in which the well-being of the people cannot be separated from the

well-being of the land, the water, the plants, and the animals. To protect Isha'kowoch is to honor a responsibility carried by our ancestors and owed to generations still to come.

That responsibility is now urgent. Development, dams, and water diversions have pushed the southern steelhead to the brink of extinction, with only a handful of spawning fish observed in recent years. Water supply infrastructure operated by the challenging agency includes dams that block the steelhead from reaching the upstream habitat where they spawn, severing a cycle that has connected the Chumash people to these waters for thousands of years.

Isha'kowoch is related to salmon and can live in both freshwater streams and the ocean. The species follows more than one life history. Some fish, commonly called rainbow trout, spend their entire lives in freshwater while others, known as steelhead, are anadromous, meaning they are born in freshwater, migrate to the ocean to mature, and then return to rivers and streams to spawn. These resident freshwater populations matter for the species' recovery because they can produce anadromous steelhead offspring. The court's protections cover both steelhead and rainbow trout below dams from Santa Barbara County to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Wishtoyo will continue to stand with its partners and the broader community to ensure that Isha'kowoch, and the sacred rivers it calls home, are protected and restored for future generations.

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