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Cash money, muscle and machines

Trout Unlimited's Embrace-A-Stream program uses all three aspects of contribution to heal streams and rivers around the country

By Rob Roberts
Trout Unlimited

Perched on a rocky ledge, Matt Woodard enjoys the bucolic view of the Conant Valley below. He can almost see the shadows of fish in Garden Creek — native Yellowstone cutthroat trout darting out from behind boulders, pouncing on beetles and ants caught in the flow. As he looks farther down the valley, he sees the South Fork of the Snake River and thinks about the larger trout that will soon come up the creek to spawn.

Sometimes Matt gets carried away. Sometimes he forgets that Garden Creek has disappeared, that it has not existed for more than 50 years.

Or maybe he knows — thanks in part to a Trout Unlimited (TU) Embrace-A-Stream grant — Garden Creek will flow again.

In 1975, TU created the Embrace-A-Stream program specifically to help its members restore degraded portions of their local streams and rivers. Since then, it has become TU's flagship grant initiative for funding grassroots fishery and watershed conservation efforts, providing a total of more than \$3 million in direct cash grants, helping volunteers complete more than 750 projects.

Embrace-A-Stream has evolved since its early days, with proposals and the review process both growing in sophistication. Massive, multi-year projects using heavy machinery have replaced the rock-rolling get-togethers of days past.



Thanks to Trout Unlimited's Embrace-A-Stream grant, Garden Creek will flow again.

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MATT WOODARD
Trout Unlimited stream design specialist, Jim MacCartney, oversees the construction of Garden Creek's new channel.

Trout Unlimited chapters now partner with universities, federal and state agencies, corporations, community groups and other non-profits, increasing their ability to get things done. And their focus has shifted from working harder to working smarter.

In 2004, Trout Unlimited will mail checks totaling about \$200,000 to volunteers ready to work in 19 states, from the famed waters of the Gunnison River to the secluded creeks of the native brook trout in Southern Appalachia.

Garden Creek is among the most high profile projects, a perfect example of TU's emphasis on good science, habitat restoration and community partnerships.

Like many small streams in Idaho, Garden Creek starts as a trickle high in the mountains. It depends on the accumulated snow pack and periodic summer rains to replenish its flow. Then it meanders through the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, where moose, elk, mule deer and other wildlife dot its banks. And then Garden Creek abruptly disappears.

Outdated irrigation practices have dewatered the lower portions of Garden Creek, leaving it dry. The creek has lacked a consistent flow for so long that the streambed became overgrown, blending into the pastures of Conant Valley.

Native Yellowstone cutts that historically migrated from the South Fork of the Snake River to its upper reaches have been blocked, unable to access their traditional breeding grounds. At the same time, fish migrating downstream have been trapped by water diversion structures, adding to fish mortality rates. A four-year-long drought in the area has only added to the list of complications.

A coalition of groups, led by Trout Unlimited and its Snake River Cutthroats Chapter, has launched a major reconstruction project to reconnect Garden Creek, while working to preserve traditional ranching operations in the area. The list of partnering organizations is impressive: the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, One Fly Foundation, and Idaho Fish and Game have all supported the project.



MATT WOODARD
Volunteers bevel back a bank on lower Garden Creek.

Working together, they will refurbish irrigation systems and replace damaged livestock fencing. Then they'll bring in the heavy machinery and install a new fish-friendly passage beneath one of the busiest highways in the state. Since they have already mapped the former stream channel, they'll only have to go in and dig it.

Woodard, manager of TU's South Fork of the Snake River Watershed Project, thinks

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all the effort is worthwhile.



An irrigation channel — similar to ones that drained Garden Creek — is filled in with soil.

"It's a complicated process," he says of navigating the potential pitfalls of a process that seats so many parties at the same table. "But I've lived in this area all of my life and know how important ranching is to the economy. It's amazing to see landowners, conservationists, and the government working together to save the Yellowstone cutthroat."

A wise man once said that you can never step in the same river twice. With money from Trout Unlimited's Embrace-A-Stream program, a bunch of concerned people in Idaho are trying to prove him

wrong.

To find out more about Trout Unlimited's Embrace-A-Stream program, go to: <http://www.tu.org/conservation/eas.asp>

To find out more about the Garden Creek Project and the South Fork of the Snake River Watershed Project, go to: <http://www.tu.org/southfork/habitat.asp>



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