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ANIMALS

A rare salmon went extinct in a California creek. People are trying to bring it back

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

By Danielle Venton (KQED)

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Decades ago, salmon in the Pescadero Creek along the California coast went extinct. Now conservationists, farmers and federal money for addressing human-caused climate change are helping them return.

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MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

The town of Pescadero on the California coast, was once known for fish. A few decades ago, though, salmon went extinct in Pescadero Creek. Now, conservationists and farmers and federal money are helping bring them back. Danielle Venton from member station KQED has this story on how that's being done.

DANIELLE VENTON, BYLINE: You'll usually find cabbage, spinach or cauliflower growing at Fifth Crow Farm in Pescadero. But past the farm's main buildings, there's a curious sight. And at first glance, honestly, it doesn't look like much.

JOE ISSEL: It kind of looks like someone made some burn piles and stockpiled some compost...

VENTON: That's Joe Issel from San Mateo County's Resource Conservation District.

ISSEL: ...But this is a highly engineered project and...

VENTON: This is a restored floodplain near a bend in Pescadero Creek. It's around three football fields in size and bare dirt piled with logs that look ready for a bonfire. Fish, like coho salmon, need floodplains during winter when there's lots of water rushing in creeks. They use places where water slows down to eat all the bugs crawling out of the soil.

ISSEL: Get huge and big so they're fit and strong, and they can survive the big, scary ocean and come back here and spawn. But that habitat was pretty much nonexistent.

VENTON: The work to create this habitat happened last summer. It's one of the first projects on the central California coast to be completed with millions of dollars from the nation's first major climate policy - the Inflation Reduction Act.

(SOUNDBITE OF BIRD CAWING)

VENTON: Human-caused climate change is tied to the future of salmon all along the West Coast. Wildfires, floods, droughts and extreme storms have all contributed to their decline. The coho salmon found historically in Pescadero Creek are special fish. They are the southernmost subset of salmon and the most endangered. These coho are specially adapted to live in the warmer temperatures

of the central California coast. And this farming community in Pescadero cares about them.

JOHN VARS: I've kind of fallen in love with this story of salmon and steelhead...

VENTON: John Vars is one of the farm owners. He raises chickens, grows vegetables and operates an apple orchard.

VARS: ...In the sense that they are this amazing way in which nutrients return from the ocean to the land. And obviously, as an organic farmer, we're very interested in how fertility is grown on the land over time.

VENTON: The restored part of the farm is owned by an open space trust that leases it to Fifth Crow. The farm began working with conservationists a few years ago.

VARS: We are very committed to trying to do our best to work with nature, but we also need water.

VENTON: And that can sometimes make salmon recovery tricky when farmers are asked not to use as much water as they would like and instead leave it in rivers and streams. But here, says Joe Issel from the local conservation district, the project's been designed to work for farmers and for fish.

ISSEL: There used to be a small pond here that wasn't in operation. It really all filled in with sediment and vegetation.

VENTON: So they're rebuilding the pond and making it bigger. Issel says it will be pumped full during the winter months when water is abundant in the creek.

ISSEL: And so we want to take advantage of that and store that winter water for use in the summer during the dry season.

VENTON: The farmer, Issel explains, gets more water security but agrees not to pump out of the creek during the summer when salmon need water the most.

ISSEL: And you can only really get these win-win projects when you let nature do its work.

VENTON: And it's working. Coho have started to come back after being extinct in Pescadero Creek for nearly 20 years. Recovery is a long road ahead. But it's

possible that, in time, this little farming town could become known for its fish again.

For NPR News, I'm Danielle Venton in Pescadero.

(SOUNDBITE OF SAM TOMPKINS SONG, "SEE ME")

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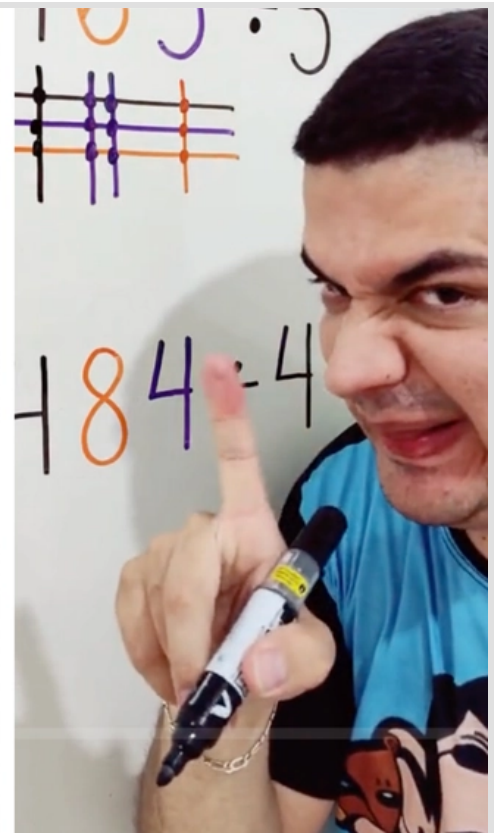
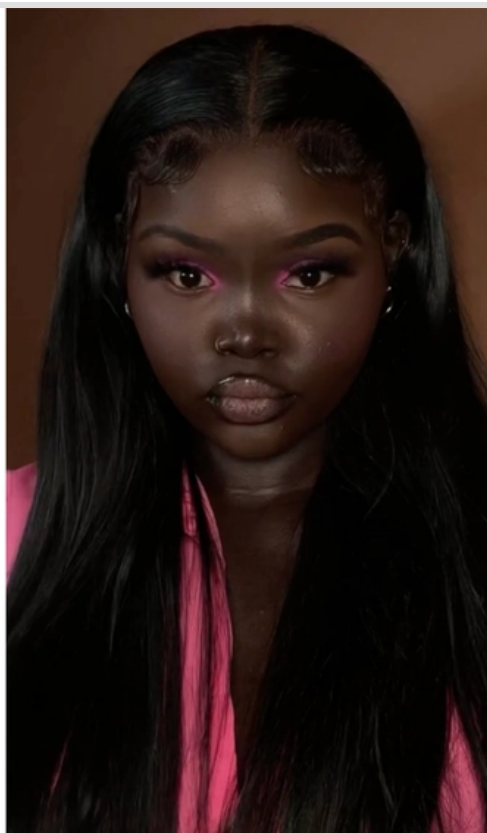


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