

Methow Valley News

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Resurfacing as art



Public project blends vintage cars and fish recovery

By Marcy Stamper

It's been half a century since cars had fins, but a dozen vehicles embedded in the bank of the Methow River have sprouted cut-outs of entire fish.

In a collaborative project, the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation and the Methow Arts Alliance have commissioned two local artists to fashion cut-outs of endangered salmon from the vintage cars. The idea is to raise awareness of the importance of habitat recovery for fish, according to MSRF president Chris Johnson.

"We wanted to do something a little out there – to get out of the newsletter approach and partner with an arts group to promote salmon recovery and public art," he said.

The idea combines several incongruous aspects of the existing river habitat to create art that will grab the public's attention, highlight efforts to recover three species of endangered fish, and preserve a piece of local history.

"It's really innovative to combine public artwork, local artists and environmental efforts," said Methow Arts executive director Amanda Jackson. "It creates this bridge between things Methow Valley residents love, and connecting artwork with it creates more community involvement."

"There's this mythology that when we buy private property for salmon recovery, it's off limits, but we're trying to engage people," said Johnson.

Many people who fish or float the river are familiar with the vintage cars – most from the 1940s, plus a few older models – embedded in the steep eastern bank of the Methow River below the Methow Valley State Airport and adjacent North Cascades Smokejumper Base. Anchored by rocks and by trees and shrubs that grow through missing windows, the cars were reportedly placed in the riverbank shortly after the devastating 1948 flood, said Johnson.

It is not clear who placed them there or whether it was part of an official erosion-control plan, he said. Most have had their batteries removed and fluids were either drained or long ago seeped out. The Washington State Department of Transportation, which assumed management and operations of the airport in the 1950s, has no records regarding the decision to place the cars on the riverbank, according to airport manager Paul Wolf.

Using cars to shore up riverbanks was common for many years, a practice often referred to as “Detroit riprap,” according to Rivers of North America, a compilation of research on rivers and their ecosystems.

“No one really owns the cars – they’re relics; artifacts in the river,” said Johnson, who said he sees them in the same light as discarded refrigerators and car parts that are removed in clean-up drives.

Although the cars were placed in the bank after the 1948 flood, Jennifer Molesworth, Methow subbasin liaison for the Bureau of Reclamation, said a hydrogeologist working with the agency has deemed the cars are not serving any structural purpose. Under ordinary high flows, the cars are barely submerged because the river spreads onto the floodplain on the opposite bank, but in a severe flood they would probably be uprooted and tossed by the river, she said.

Cars into art

Specialists on salmon recovery and river restoration have long debated what to do about the cars. Some wanted the cars pulled out so the bank could be restored to its natural state, but others had come to appreciate them, both for their quirky aesthetic and as a piece of local history. Needless to say, over the years, the cars have taken on a rusted patina.

“A lot of people don’t want them there and think they’re just junk,” said Molesworth. “They don’t belong there, but they look kind of cool.”

Johnson said he has spent many hours contemplating an innovative treatment for the cars. About two years ago, he began working with Methow Arts, who found local artists interested in using the cars in sculptures and other art projects.

The first effort to blend a river project and art came in 2009, when one of the cars was extricated as part of the Methow Valley Irrigation District’s retrofit of its diversion system, which MSRF helped coordinate. But the car got so mangled that it was no longer suitable for art, leading Johnson and Jackson to brainstorm ways of creating art that would leave the cars in place.

This August that new concept began to take form – specifically, the form of endangered salmon – when MSRF and Methow Arts commissioned Okanogan multi-media artist Dan Brown and Twisp metal artist Barry Stromberger. Brown drew outlines on car doors and hoods of spring Chinook, steelhead and bull trout – the three listed species in the river – and Pacific lamprey, another native and increasingly rare fish.

Stromberger returned to the site two weeks ago, equipped with an oxyacetylene torch and assistants with a boat. Following Brown’s sketches, Stromberger sliced the fish out of the cars, taking 11 for sculptures and leaving three silhouettes still attached to catch the eye of passing boaters and fishers. “At times, it feels like the fish want to come out, and I’m releasing them,” said Stromberger as he tapped the fish out with a hammer.

“I have to admit they’re really beautiful – I’d never thought about cutting up cars before,” said Brown, who regularly incorporates found objects in his art. He will add fins, gills and other details with a plasma cutter.

Stromberger is creating designs using the cut-outs for installation at the Twisp Ponds Community Trails Project. The 30-acre site, owned by MSRF, is about half a mile west of town on Twisp River Road. In addition to public trails, it includes rearing ponds and is used for educational programs by the foundation’s partners. The fish installed along the trails will help set the stage for a larger public art project of freestanding works of art, kinetic sculptures and other installations, said Jackson.

The art-outreach project is supported by public and private grants, including support from the Bonneville Environmental Foundation.

The project has already drawn the attention of at least one man, who was fishing on the Methow while Stromberger cut into the cars. “I’ve seen some strange things on the river, but this is the strangest,” he said.

Photo by Marcy Stamper:

Metal artist Barry Stromberger, top, sliced an endangered salmon out of the hood of a vintage yellow Plymouth that has been embedded in the bank of the Methow River for more than half a century. Stromberger’s work, which will become part of a public art project, drew appreciation from biologist John Crandall of the Wild Fish Conservancy, right.

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