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PROPOSED TROUT UNLIMITED CLASS A WILD TROUT MANAGEMENT PLAN

June 1, 1996

Background

In 1983, OPERATION FUTURE was implemented to establish new guidelines for the management of Pennsylvania's fisheries. One of the cornerstones of this program was to identify those streams which supported good wild trout populations, and manage them without hatchery augmentation. Initially, 450 miles of streams--with brown trout populations of at least 40 kilograms per hectare (Kg/ha), and 30 Kg/ha for brook trout waters--were identified.

Except for stocking termination, no other restrictions were initiated, as it was believed that decreased angling pressure would provide adequate protection to maintain or enhance wild standing stocks. Objectives were originally limited to avoidance of degradation of standing crops.

Press releases in 1989 and 1993 suggested that Class A waters were thriving under current statewide regulations. New Class A waters were discovered and added each year, and have now helped double the original mileage--in spite of the fact that many of the original "A" sections have degraded and been dropped. One or two objectives were added; but served primarily only as guidelines. The 1995 annual report stated that a new report "reflected...positive response" to the current wild trout program.

Discussion

A review of the 1983 wild trout sections that remained as Class A, a decade later revealed overall degradation, with two sections significantly degraded for every section that had equal enhancement. Overall, just 20% of evaluated sections had improved standing stocks exceeding 10%. The 1995 PFBC report reflected the same overall two to one ration of significant degradation under current management.

Present Class A policy has failed to protect, much less enhance, original standing crops. Only those Class A sections under special regulations show overall improvement. This points to over-harvest as the limiting factor of unrestricted Class A water. Interestingly, wild trout populations in Class B stocked streams may be faring better than are the Class A's. The only explanation for this may be that the latter waters have been publicized by the Commission, magazine articles, and at least three 'where to go' books. Anglers, particularly those who fish wild trout streams, are better informed and have the expertise to exploit wild fisheries. These are often the top ten percent of anglers who catch 80% to 90% of our trout.

The Commission is striving to increase use of wild trout waters, quote: "E&I emphasis on wild trout resource...to emphasize wild trout fishing in aquatic education and advanced fishing skills programs". Promotion of this program before it's 'fixed' will exacerbate the problem. Longer term enhancement for most small to medium size streams includes habitat upgrade through Adopt a Stream or other similarly oriented programs.

Findings

The PFBC is committed to protect, conserve and enhance its fishery resource. In spite of published claims, this has not been done for our wild trout streams--those streams which are in greatest need of restrictive management. The Commission has publicly promised (at Wild Trout III in Yellowstone) that if wild trout waters--under statewide regulations--have become "not as good as originally thought, necessary action" to upgrade the resource will be taken. While "as originally thought" hardly constitutes a specific objective, the management of wild trout streams, other than to eliminate degraded stream sections, appears to be unchanged.

Change is overdue. Our wild resource is degrading under current management. Angler equipment and expertise are much improved. Only the willingness of many expert anglers to return their catch has delayed far greater over-harvest. Pandering to the small percentage of anglers whose goal is maximum harvest is equivalent to "harvest mentality", a form of management no longer acceptable to most fisheries managers. Both economic and resource calculations indicate that each angler's annual share of our trout resource is 6 or 7 trout. The share of just wild trout is 2 or 3 per year. Based on angler hours per acre, our trout resource is the most heavily fished in the nation. Pennsylvania arguably should have the most restrictive wild trout regulations in the nation, not, as now, perhaps the most liberal ones.

Recommended Action

In order to insure protection and enhancement of our wild trout fisheries, and to offset over four decades without harvest reduction, drastic creel restrictions are essential, linked with prioritized habitat improvement. PATU supports and will work to obtain the following regulations and objectives for Class A and Wilderness trout streams:

Creel: No more than two (2) trout total of all species may be in possession of an angler who is fishing or has fished a wild trout stream on that or previous dates.

Minimum size for harvest:

- Brook trout: 9"
- Other Species: 12"

Equipment: Any equipment item or lure that is permitted under statewide regulations may be used. Artificial lures only might be considered on publically owned waters.

Seasons: Trout may be taken only from the trout season opener in April thru Labor Day. No trout may be taken or killed from wild trout waters after Labor Day until the following April opener.

Stocking: Under normal conditions, to reduce genetic risk, wild trout streams will not be stocked. If for any reason--such as extreme drought or pollution--it is deemed necessary to re-establish populations, fry or fingerling trout should be utilized.

Five Year Objectives: Fifty percent increase in standing crop and 100% increase of harvestable size trout. Fifteen hundred miles of trout streams under Class A Management.

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