

CRITIQUE OF PENNSYLVANIA WILD TROUT PROGRAM

PRESENTED TO THE WILD TROUT WORKGROUP

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"Fishing if I a fisher may protest, of pleasures  
is the sweetest, of sports the best, of exercise  
the most excellent, of recreation the most  
innocent, but now the sport is marred, and wot  
ye why? Fishes decreased and fishers multiply".

Issac Walton

The Pennsylvania F&BC Fisheries Bureau personnel have been advising commissioners and anglers for two decades that reducing creel limits will not significantly reduce or distribute harvest. If pressed, they imply that only by increasing minimum size can this be accomplished. This claim depends on many factors, and without disclaimers is spurious at best, and untrue and misleading under many conditions.

Because of this thinking, our general creel limit of eight trout has been unchanged since 1952 and is now among the nation's very most liberal. Exacerbating this is the fact that, according to a study that appeared in the AFS Fisheries magazine, our state is the most heavily fished as well, with 664 angler hours per acre overall. While most other states have been decreasing state creel limits, and have drastically restricted harvest to protect their blue ribbon streams,

Pennsylvania has done little but tinker with special regulation waters that cover less than two percent of our trout streams. These are the streams least in need of regulatory change. Could this be a tactic to divert attention from how the remainder of our streams are regulated?

Consider some of the factors that affect the usefulness of creel limits. They are 1) Stream order (size), 2) Production to biomass ratio, 3) Species, 4) Angler hours per acre use, and 5) Population limiting factors. Based on surveys that I performed as the Commission's former planner, demand on our cold-water fishery is between 1200 and 1500 angler hours per acre. Allowing for the increased number of anglers, improved angler education and expertise, more free time, greatly improved equipment, and better 'where-to-go' knowledge (3 books in recent years), a daily allowance of 2 trout today would be equivalent of the 8 creel limit set in 1952.

Respected fisheries scientists recognize that restrictive creel limits will reduce harvest, as will carefully crafted size restrictions. A minimum size of 9 inches would help wild trout, but be of little use in redistributing adult stocked trout, most of which exceed this size when stocked. Perhaps that is why our fisheries bureau--other than increasing the state minimum size from the ultra low 6 inches to 7 inches 15 years ago, has done little but fantasize over the benefits of increased minimum size.

According to numerous professional presentations at the Wild

Trout Conferences, angling use exceeding from 100 to 400 angler hours per acre for brown trout should be protected by restrictive size and creel regulations. The nation's top fisheries scientists, including Ray White, Robert Behnke and Bob Hunt, have all stressed the need for protective creel regulations for wild trout. Rainbow trout resource use between 50 and 150 angler hours per acre and brook and cutthroat use in the 20 to 50 hour category will usually also require protection. What's the bottom line for Pennsylvania with average coldwater use of 1200-1500 hours per acre?

Extremely heavy demand on underregulated resources!

Our fisheries bureau hoped that ending stocking on our fragile Class A trout streams would reduce angling pressure enough to protect them, and promised to take action whenever this did not happen. They provided at least two press releases and one statement (in the 1995 Annual Report) stressing the success of the Wild Trout Program. These releases were---not accurate. Actually, until I gave the coldwater unit leader my copy of the original surveys, he had no basis for making comparisons between the original (1982) compilation and 1992, when the second release was given. My careful analysis comparing the original surveys with follow-up surveys, revealed that twice as many Class A streams had significantly degraded as had upgraded. The same overall downgrade ratio applied to a study by the bureau in 1995, using their selected streams.

Except for some smoke and mirrors, and in spite of the fact that the identified number of Class A waters has about doubled since 1982, nothing has been done to protect our wild trout streams from over-harvest. Our fisheries bureau tells us that since the average angler catches from 0 to 1 trout per outing, lowering the creel limit won't help. In most fine fisheries, creel limits are lower than the anglers expect to catch. That's why they are called catch limits. It isn't the average angler that is hurting these (primarily) small streams. It's the experts who hit the stream after a rain, quickly catch their limit and may move on to a second stream and second limit. Two or three expert anglers can knock a small wild brown trout stream out of that status in a year. Only the fact that many of our best fishermen realize they should return most of their legal catch, saves many of our trout streams from being wiped out. But it's unfair and poor management to have to count on their generosity.

A word on distribution. If the ten percent of anglers who creel over 80% of the trout were forced to reduce their harvest by just 20%, the number of fish left to the other 90% would increase by 80%. Its win-win, because the experts would probably also end up catching and returning more trout.

Let's take a look at what happened to the trout population in neighbor Maryland's wild trout fishery after they reduced their creel limit to 2 trout. According to Bob Bachman,

director in inland fisheries, the population of these steams increased by 200% to 400% within a few years, and the desired sized trout increased even more dramatically.

Conewago Creek in Adams County was a borderline Class B/C trout stream with very few trout over 8 inch length under PF&BC management, in spite of strong recruitment years. I was hired as manager of 1.5 miles of heavily fished club water. Members pay \$500 annually for the privilege of fishing over a wild and fingerling enhanced population which includes an excellent head of 12 to 16 inch trout and trophy trout of three species exceeding 20". We've had poor recruitment years but continue to stockpile biomass and I anticipate permitting limited harvest when we attain the desired population structure and other objectives. Our biomass now is estimated to be over 300% higher than under state management. If the Commission implements the Trout Unlimited proposed wild trout regulations, I may be the big loser; our wild trout streams could become so good that few would be willing to pay \$500 for the privilege of fishing club water.

That's a chance I hope to lose.