

Outdoors: Wild vs. stocked trout

Len Lichvar

Daily American Outdoor Correspondent

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As current Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) Commissioner Eric Hussar puts it, “Common ground is very uncommon.” In today’s world of extreme polarity that could refer to multiple topics. However, Hussar was referring to the now deepening divide between anglers who judge trout fishing in Pennsylvania in regard to how many trout are artificially raised and stocked and those who focus on and prefer the increasing numbers of wild stream bred trout.

No doubt there has been and continues to be room for both until the two overlap, which is when the room tightens. Stocking of trout in waters that now hold various levels of wild trout is a fisheries management flash point that has gotten brighter in recent years.

The reason is that over the past several decades the state’s overall water quality has improved significantly from the days of unregulated environmental degradation that ran rampant driven by the industrial revolution’s thirst for resources in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As documented in the book “To Protect, Conserve and Enhance — The History of the PA Fish and Boat Commission,” water pollution and unscrupulous activities by anglers were creating a huge fish depletion of the natural stocks. To address this issue the early version of the Commission began the construction of fish hatcheries and along with existing commercial hatcheries the solution to pollution became simply attempting to replace decimated fish populations with a temporary fix of artificial plantings of trout.

That continued to be the only accepted solution until the 1960's and 70's when an environmental awakening of sorts began to take hold with the public, as well as state and national elected officials. Laws and regulations were supported and implemented that gradually began to restore land and water resources.

By the 1980's fish populations, that were severely impacted but never completely eliminated, began to rebound. The state's native brook trout, which have been mostly relegated to remote headwater streams, began to stabilize and introduced species such as brown and even rainbow trout began to naturally reproduce and expand in many downstream waters.

In 1983 the Commission, under the leadership of legendary Executive Director Ralph Abele, in response to this positive trend, made a shift in philosophy and mission. The agency pivoted from just providing a temporary recreational resource to something called "Resource First" with the creation of a new policy dubbed "Operation Future." Among the hallmarks of the initiative was to manage self-sustaining fish populations as renewable resources and use hatchery fish to provide recreation in those waters where fish numbers were inadequate to sustain the fishery at desired levels. It also defined class populations with Class A being the level of abundance needed to support a recreational sport fishery.

The agency attempted to build upon this altered direction with other programs to the point where the future is now. Among them is the Unassessed Waters Program, aimed at surveying and determining the trout populations of thousands of miles of water that were never previously assessed. This ongoing monumental effort has identified and documented wild trout waters that either were there all along or have recovered in recent years enough to naturally sustain recreational fisheries. From 2010 to 2018, 5,615 miles were added to the wild trout water list and 2,402 miles to the Class A list.

The effort began to identify some sections of water that were historically stocked, but for a variety of environmental enhancements were now confirmed to hold a recreational capacity fishery of natural reproducing trout.

All this first came to a head in 2015 when the majority of the PFBC Board of Commissioners, supported by Bureau of Fisheries staff at the time, voted in favor of continuing to stock 13 newly designated Class A wild trout waters primarily for the social reason of long term high angler use of those waters. That in particular did not sit well with the proponents of the wild trout resource then or now.

Commission staff has resurveyed both fish and anglers on these stream sections and after the data is assimilated will make a recommendation to the Commissioners at a future meeting to continue the stocking or alter the action in some way.

At the most recent Commission meeting in regard to the wild trout resource PFBC Chief of the Division of Fisheries Management Dave Nihart stated, “Resource based management is at the core of the agency’s mission.” However, shortly after during a discussion regarding the possible exemption of the no stocking policy over several newly determined Class A wild brook trout waters Commissioner Roco Ali sounded a different tone with, “Maybe it should not be about science all the time.”

Pennsylvania chapter of the Native Fish Coalition Chairman, Philip Light, follows these discussions and actions closely and describes the Commission’s current stocking strategy as “a hot mess.” He adds, “Stocking Class A sections is an oxymoron. It is simply a misuse of stocked trout and needlessly puts added angling pressure on wild trout.”

Co-Chairman of the Pennsylvania Council of Trout Unlimited’s Trout Policy Committee Dave Rothrock concurs. He explains, “The stocking of Class A water has unintentional consequences. This stocking not only draws angling

pressure that otherwise would not be present on wild trout but also creates the higher angler use that has been promoted as the reason to do it.”

The topic of wild vs stocked sparked debate not long ago when a section Penns Creek that has historically been stocked was determined by surveys to now hold a sufficient reproducing population that no longer required supplemental stocking. That sparked an up-roar from a local sportsmen’s club that had always stocked it. This time Fisheries staff recommended the elimination of stocking and the Commissioners held steady and approved it.

Adding more fuel to the smoldering fire is the long standing ability for private clubs, and individuals to place trout where they desire without any documented oversight. Some PFBC supported Coops have also been guilty of not following guidance. This enables wild cat stocking of wild trout waters that otherwise would be prohibited by PFBC policy.

To finally address this issue the Bureau of Fisheries is planning to present to the Commissioners a proposal for a stocking authorization that is recommended in the new 2021 Trout Management Plan. This would require anyone that wishes to place trout in waters of the Commonwealth to receive approval from the Commission prior to doing so. According to the Director Bureau of Fisheries, Kris Kuhn, this proposal will come up for consideration in early 2022.

Hussar, who is often frustrated with lack of understanding of the importance of the wild trout resource, along with the support of several other Commissioners, recently made a call to have all Class A waters be declared Catch and Release Artificial Lures Only. His proposal, which was not adopted, was supported in some angling circles, but severely criticized in many others. Undeterred Hussar states, “Despite these reactions on both sides I plan to keep the conversation going in regard to options for innovative and better wild trout management.”

Using hatchery fish to compensate for the destruction of natural populations was in the past a necessary effort and unfortunately is still required and needed today in waters that still suffer from degradation. However, because that needed process has now transcended generations of anglers it has been ingrained in angling tradition even as the need for it has evolved. As legendary angler the late Lefty Kreh often said, "Tradition is fine as long as it does not get in the way of progress."

Indeed we have progressed in a positive way in regard to improving our aquatic resources as well as in agency led trout management programs and the increasing numbers of wild trout are the indicators of that progress. Perhaps the Commission, Commissioners, fisheries staff and both stocked and wild trout enthusiasts will also progress and someday find Hussar's elusive "common ground."