

Fish and Fishermen



By Jim McLennan

The provincial government has released its plan to aid fish population recovery in a number of Alberta trout streams. It's called the North Central Native Trout Recovery (NCNTR) program, and was outlined nicely by Joanna Skrajny, AWA Conservation Specialist, in the December, 2017 issue of this magazine. As outlined by Skrajny, the problem is that populations of native fish have declined and need help to recover.

Reading through the document and Skrajny's article produces mixed reactions. Much of the plan is laudable. Repairing hanging culverts, improving road crossings, and increasing enforcement of angling regulations are all logical tools for attempt-

ing to right some of the wrongs that have occurred in these waters for the last hundred or so years. But that said, the plan is light on identification of baseline science to justify the types of initiatives to be implemented, less than completely transparent, and short on input from the public.

One action in the plan jumps out at me above the others: Removing anglers from the streams. Portions of seven streams in the Red Deer, North Saskatchewan and Peace River drainages will be closed completely to fishing for at least five years, starting in 2018. Not closed during spawning seasons when trout and their eggs are vulnerable; not closed on alternate years, as many streams were from the

1950s to the 1980s; not closed at times when high water temperatures add additional stress to trout; but closed completely for a *minimum of five years*. Five years is a long time, especially for those of us who realize that such closures will prevent us from ever fishing these waters again. Given the aging demographics of anglers in Alberta, that group will have plenty of members. Melancholy reflection aside, let's consider things more concrete.

First, there is the practice of catch-and-release fishing, which for a number of years has been in effect on most of the streams to be closed. It's no longer a new idea, but one that has been used widely to maintain fish populations in the face of increasing



A bull trout (left) and a cutthroat trout (right), two of the species-at-risk that the North-Central Native Trout Recovery program aims to assist.

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Fly-fishing in Alberta's Foothills PHOTO: © J. & L. MCLENNAN

numbers of fishermen. It's my opinion that catch-and-release, or "no-kill" regulations should not be implemented for emotional reasons (as espoused in the "it's immoral to kill and eat a fish" view) but as a tool to address a particular issue. I've always thought that when used this way C&R was the best of three regulation-options where the population is low due to natural factors, or where trout face heavy angling pressure. If C&R is the first option, the second is allowing harvest of trout until there aren't enough fish left to pursue – neither a logical nor popular idea. The third is disallowing fishing altogether. This is the one the government has chosen, and the one the AWA and other Alberta conservation groups are supporting.

Of the many questions left unanswered in the NCNTR document, many concern the role of anglers. Is there evidence that fishing pressure – either through non-compliance with catch-and-release regulations, or through incidental mortality from C&R – is

a significant cause of the decline? Are there comparative studies of the number of angler/days on these streams that show an increase or decrease in stream-use over time?

It's logical to assume that the closures of these streams will direct pressure to other waters that remain open to angling. How will this be monitored and addressed? If angling pressure is the problem, as the implementation of closures suggests, with fewer waters available to anglers the problem will simply be shifted to the waters that remain open. What then?

The government document says catch-and-release has "mostly failed." A strong statement. How was this determination made? Are there comparative population studies done over a suitable period of time that show this, or is it opinion? What is the level of compliance with catch-and-release regulations? That is, to what degree is illegal harvest ("poaching") a factor in catch-and-release streams? If poaching is significant, it could make the regulation appear

to be ineffective when really the problem is compliance, and thereby an issue not of regulation, but of enforcement. And if compliance with C&R regulations is poor, why would one expect compliance with closures to be better?

The NCNTR program document says "Local results will be compared with fish population targets (Fisheries Management Objective) established for each watershed in 2017/18." How were the population targets established? What was their initial baseline? It also says, "All recovery efforts in the selected watersheds will be carefully recorded to determine which actions were successful and which were not." Is it just me or does this sound more like an experiment than a proven strategy?

Even more significant, by closing streams to all fishing, the government is choosing to address what is at worst a minor cause of population decline. Is it a case of doing the easy thing because addressing the real cause of the problem is more difficult?

Is it using a water pistol to fight a forest fire? The more serious problems, the government document acknowledges, are the impacts of public roads, industrial disturbances, forestry, and off-highway vehicle activity, all of which fall under the category of *habitat degradation*, which is the real wearer of the black hat. These factors easily trump whatever negative effects anglers may have on fish populations. If the major problems are not addressed more aggressively, closing streams won't help. A bandaid on the thumb won't do much good if the body is diseased.

In a letter to Alberta's Minister of Environment and Parks, Shannon Phillips, the Alberta chapter of the conservation group, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (backcountryhunters.org), put it this way: "... public concern, spearheaded primarily by anglers, about Arctic grayling, Athabasca rainbow trout, and bull trout all led to past proposals to eliminate or rigorously control industrial activity in, among others, the upper Little Smoky, Berland, and McLeod River systems... with the hopes of population recovery/improvement." But previous administrations implemented catch-and-release regulations, without addressing the root cause of the problem (habitat degradation), possibly contributing to the view that C&R regulations have "largely failed."

While I agree with many of the government proposals it should be clear that I strongly disagree with closing the streams to fishing. And it's not simply because I want to continue to fish these places. It's because I believe that in the big picture – which is the only one that counts – trout need fishermen more than fishermen need trout.

Why? Because history has repeatedly shown that the staunchest and most committed supporters, protectors and restorers of wildlife and the places they live are the people who spend the most time with them – hunters and anglers. In a world that boils most everything down to the presence, availability, and use of money, the greatest amount raised and directed toward wildlife conservation has come from hunters and

anglers, often through groups like Trout Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited. Readers interested in learning more about this should read *How Sportsmen Saved the World*, by E. Donnell Thomas Jr..

Those who don't hunt or fish may question the motives of hunters and fishers who say they want to preserve wildlife. But it comes down to this: a realization that the hunter/angler and the conservationist are not adversaries, but teammates (and often the same person). It's a position articulated in the 1940s by Aldo Leopold, more recently in Alberta by Andy Russell, and presently in Alberta by others, including avid hunter, angler, writer, and conservation activist (and former Banff Park superintendent), Kevin Van Tighem.

There are two places fishermen and women need to be found: First, in the water, enjoying these places in a non-destructive way, watching them, monitoring their health, providing strong and unified resistance to the threats that inevitably appear. In short, loving them, and putting their money, time and sweat where their mouths are, to pre-

serve and protect the wild places and the creatures that live there. Second, they need to be present at the discussion-table, speaking for the resources, playing a larger role in the consultation process than they have in general, and a larger role in this issue in particular.

In private correspondence leading to this article, *Wild Lands Advocate* editor, Ian Urquhart, said, "Fishermen have played a very important and positive role historically in many, many conservation efforts. Keeping them off the waters arguably weakens the very attachment to the landscape that organizations like AWA strive to promote." Truth, that. And truth I hope organizations like Alberta Wilderness Association and Trout Unlimited Canada will embrace, hopefully rethinking their positions on the wisdom of forcing the fish's strongest and most committed defenders (dare I say *advocates?*) off the water. ♣

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In late February Minister Phillips, citing a need to review the scientific evidence her department used to propose the angling bans contained in the North Central Native Trout Recovery program, withdrew the proposed bans for the 2018 fishing season. The Alberta chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers did not support the ban; in a letter to the government they expressed their view that "the burden of recovery is being placed on anglers, with little effort undertaken to remedy the underlying root causes of the population decline, which can specifically be defined as: public roads, industrial disturbances, forestry, and OHV activity". Trout Unlimited Canada's statement on the closures said that while "catch and release angling is an effective management tool for stable fish populations, the science suggests even incidental or accidental mortality related to catch and release angling may elevate the risk a population faces" and supported the use of an angling closure rest period, but reiterated that "the recovery of East Slopes salmonids is not just a Fisheries Management issue, nor is it solely the responsibility of Alberta Environment and Parks. Protection of these shared resources for current and future generations demands action across ministries, including Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, Alberta Transportation, Alberta Energy, and Justice and Solicitor General." AWA agrees with this conclusion; it's clear that addressing degraded fisheries habitat and preventing further damage from occurring must be a top priority, but a rest period for these watersheds might just be the boost these fish need in order to recover. AWA looks forward to announcements in the near future from the province about the ambitious measures they will take in 2018 to improve trout habitat in the foothills of north central Alberta.

- Joanna Skrajny/Ian Urquhart