

The Batten Kill stocking: A matter of class?

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If you've been following the Batten Kill trout stocking controversy, you know that the state, in the name of keeping hungry anglers happy, wants to stock the main stem of the Batten Kill with 1,000 sterile rainbow trout (fish whose sole purpose is to be caught and eaten; sterile so, in theory, the fish won't affect wild populations of brown and brook trout).

The conservation group Trout Unlimited claims it's naive to think that such a stocking program won't effect the native fish. On Tuesday night, TU hosted a presentation by ecologist Robert Bachman at Burr and Burton's Riley Theater designed to reinforce its stance on the issue.

Bachman, a former fisheries supervisor for the state of Maryland, was an entertaining speaker. A roundish, older gentleman, he projected the distinguished, rumpley aura of a college professor. He spoke in a slightly nasally mid-Atlantic accent and had a fine wit. He used a fishing pole to point out pictures on the projector screen, and when he talked, he sometimes gestured with the pole like he was locked in a fencing duel with the audience.

Bachman's presentation highlighted wild brown trout behavior and chronicled interactions between wild browns and hatchery browns. The work was based on research he obtained during four years spent perched in a lookout tower over Pennsylvania's Spruce Creek.

During this time, Bachman and his associates from Penn State recorded 32,000 different trout observations.

Here are some cool things attendees learned from Bachman's presentation:

- * It's mathematically impossible for different trout to have the same spot patterns.
- * The Greek word for conflict is agon.
- * Trout contain small bones called otoliths that float in a fluid-filled capsule located near the base of the skull.
- * The rectangular hyperbolas equation is a useful mathematical tool for a graph-making ichthyologist (fish scientist).
- * You can age a trout by grinding down and examining its otoliths; in fact, you can look at a cross section under a wicked-powerful* microscope (*not the correct scientific term for such a microscope) and see how much a trout grew on any certain day in its lifetime.
- * A wild trout can live to be 9 years old.

Beyond the generally interesting material, here were Bachman's main points in regards to the Batten Kill stocking controversy:

1. A wild brown trout spends 95 percent of its time in a home range the size of a living room rug.
2. Trout have an extremely rigid dominance structure dictated not by age but by size.
3. Hatchery trout introduced into such a rigid environment "run around like a motorcycle gang making trouble wherever they go." Bachman had film footage that echoed his observations. Whereas the wild trout he filmed were lithe, calm creatures who spent their days in the same spot, expending as little energy as possible, feeding robotically off the current's figurative conveyor belt, the hatchery trout he showed were spastic, clumsy and without any clue as to the stream's generations old hierarchy.

Visually, the hatchery trout were inferior fish (with ratty tails; one with missing eyeballs). They came off as less-fish than-human-engineered pieces of meat, which, if fact, is their design. If the state does stock the 'Kill with sterile rainbows, it fully expects every one of the 1,000 stocked fish to die, either by a fisherman's hand or through its general ineptness. Bachman's data showed that most of the hatchery trout in his study were dead within three months. None survived the winter. The disturbing data, from his perspective, is that 12-percent of wild trout in the study area also died after he introduced the hatchery fish; a fact directly attributable, in his opinion, to increased stress.

His grand summation was this: "I don't see any way you can put hatchery trout into a wild trout stream without doing a great deal of harm. Period."

Now, of course, a phrase like "great deal of harm" is subjective. If it's a newspaper's job to help a reader understand all sides of an issue, then this story must go on. And although I'm really loath to do it, really squeamish about even bringing it up, to fully understand the issues at play here we have to talk about class. The notion of class is one of the most uncomfortable we have in the

American lexicon, but it plays a part in this controversy. TU knows this. Chapter president Eric Rickstad takes pains to distance his group from the snooty catch and release fly fisherman cliché, pointing out that he keeps fish, and he eats fish; that this issue should not be about fisherman vs. fisherman but about the health of the Batten Kill's wild trout.

But while everything Rickstad says is undeniably true, the fact remains that the fly fisherman's desire for unspoiled wild trout, an almost religious desire, is based on a portfolio of worldly experiences, experiences that are class sensitive (trips to world class trout streams, fishing seminars, Aldo Leopold books, etc.). And the learned love of wild trout over hatchery fish, the catch and release philosophy, an eco-centric view of nature, is night and day when compared to the desires of a local third-grader who knows nothing but the joy of plunking a big old nightcrawler into the 'Kill and pulling out a trout, any trout, the stupider the better.

The one moment when Tuesday night's meeting turned contentious was when someone in attendance (who left before I could get his name) pointed out that Spruce Creek, where Dr. Bachman's study was conducted, was a pay-to-fish river, privately managed, closed in many spots to the general public. He pointed out that the Batten Kill is a public river, a place where those who can't pay \$300 a day to go destination fishing can still go and hook some trout. He opined that it was important that the state consider these people's needs, which presumably meant he was in favor of the sterilized rainbow program.

Rickstad shot back, with tangible if politely controlled anger in his voice, that TU is fighting to preserve a measly six miles of stream, a comparative scrap of river. That the "average fisherman"* with worms and bobbers can fish dozens of streams around here with intensive stocking programs. That there's 650,000 stocked fish already out there for people to catch.

To which was replied: "So you'd have them fish lesser rivers." (*Rickstad didn't mean anything insulting by using the phrase "average fisherman," in fact, he was prompted into saying it; still, I'm pointing it out so you can see how loaded something as simple as language can get in these class related issues.) And that's the bottleneck here. And it's also where the general public needs to step in and be heard.

If Dr. Bachman is correct, then stocking fish into the Batten Kill will adversely impact the native population. He doesn't know how severely, but he's adamant that there will be increased stress on what everyone agrees is an already stressed indigenous trout population.

So how should we, as a society, manage the main stem of the Batten Kill? Does a hatchery trout have the same value as a wild one? Does state management of a fishery lower the value of a trophy fish by artificializing it? Is there something freaky and potentially immoral about a hatchery trout that has been robbed of its reproductive capacity and designed to die? Is it a fair comparison to wonder what people would think of a whitetail deer management program that involved releasing fallow deer each November so hunters could all bag their limit? Should the state be spending its money on hatchery trout or on habitat preservation/improvement? If a fake painting gives someone as much joy as an original, is there any tangible difference? What's the real definition of the word "pure?"

On Sept. 21, the state will be holding a public comment/information meeting on this very issue from 7 to 9 p.m. at Burr and Burton.

If you're intrigued or concerned, you should go.

Dave Mance III writes a nature column and other acutely informed ramblings for the Banner.