

Battenkill

by Bill Cairns

Part two of three

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Although special slot limit regulations were delayed from the originally proposed dates these same regulations on two miles of the Battenkill in West Arlington ultimately went into effect from 1994-1998. However, a final report from Fish & Wildlife evaluating their effectiveness concluded that they did not achieve the desired result of increasing catch rates or the abundance of quality size 10-14 " trout. The conclusion was unidentified factors affecting the trout populations throughout the river mainstream had a dominating influence rendering the special regulations ineffective.

In response to the diminishing productivity of the Battenkill a new catch and release rule was signed by then Fish & Wildlife Commissioner, Ron Regan. "The Battenkill (River) from the base of the Dufresene Pond Dam in Manchester downstream to the New York State line is hereby designated as Test Waters, from 8th April 2000 to December 31st, 2005. During this period, all trout caught must be immediately released, and anglers must provide information regarding their catch if requested by a Fish and Wildlife Department representative." This regulation affected about 20 miles of the river.

This regulation was also extended another year, to December 31st, 2006. It is worth noting there were no restrictions on the type of tackle being used. Bait, lures, or flies were all permissible as long as any fish caught were immediately released.

A team of fishery and aquatic scientists were set up to look into possible causes for the decline in the wild brown trout fishery. They identified 14 possible factors that may be contributing to the fisheries decline. These included fish habitat, water quality and pollution, stream temperatures and flows, nutrients and aquatic productivity, fish health, predation, food availability, genetics, land use and development impacts, as well as past and present resource management practices. The early efforts were to center on data collection and evaluation of fish habitat, temperatures and flows, fish health and stocking history.

In October 2005, **The Manchester Journal** had an article "Batten Kill: No place to hide" by Patrick Rheaume. It noted the findings of studies by the Green Mountain National Forest and the state fish and wildlife department have found, among other things that cover is inadequate. Cynthia Browning, the executive director of the Battenkill Watershed Alliance is quoted at some length. "I believe the strongest result that they found is the lack of enough cover for the trout."

Browning said that trout need about ten percent of the stream to have a cover of shade, deep pools or woody debris, which protects against heat, predators and floods, and creates a habitat for feeding. Right now, she said, only about two or three percent of the Battenkill proves sufficient cover.

As a result many parts of the Battenkill have not been giving the trout population adequate places to hide.

"You see this just by looking at it," Browning said, "long stretches of shallow, flat riverbed without pools or woody debris or big overhanging trees or undercut banks."

Young trout, which she said have experienced the most problems, need enough protection to grow into adulthood.

It's obvious physical changes have occurred but is there still more that might have been overlooked?

Truth sometimes hides in plain sight and a friend of mine thinks he has uncovered a previously overlooked angle. He has been remodeling a home near the river and he has a keen anglers interest in the health of the trout and their environs. He put this question to a workman assisting in the remodeling, "You've lived here your whole life, what do you think is causing the decline in fishing?"

A moment of silence implied the question was receiving his full attention, finally he said, "damned if I know, when I was a kid my mother always had 150 pounds of trout in the freezer so they must have been pretty abundant then."

My friend now concludes the decline is directly tied to the widespread use of the home freezer since trout could be stockpiled like never before.

"Thanks" I said, that makes as much sense as some of the remarks I've heard at public hearings over the years!

Next month my thoughts on stocking triploid rainbows in the Battenkill. I've had some experience with these in South Africa and they do not belong in the Battenkill.

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