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Keep the Battenkill wild and thriving

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The state and anglers need to remember the adage that good things come to those who wait.

Thoughtful efforts are under way to restore the wild brown trout population on the Battenkill, a southwestern Vermont river. That won't happen overnight, but with a little patience, the Battenkill can once again be a cherished destination for anglers everywhere.

A six-year study found that the population of the mid-sized fish dropped 70 percent in the 1990s, primarily because of a loss of the protective cover offered by downed trees and other hiding places. With no place to duck for cover, the fish are vulnerable to predators such as kingfishers and mergansers.

Working together in all their best interests, the state, Orvis, Trout Unlimited, the Battenkill Watershed Alliance and others came together to craft a restoration plan. That chiefly involved providing the fish more protective hiding holes by strategically placing downed trees in the water and other measures.

But the state went one unfortunate step further, deciding to stock about 1,000 rainbow trout in the river to improve the fishing in the short term. That plan should be scrapped.

This river is unique for its wild brook and brown trout. Anglers come from afar for the chance to catch-and-release in this special waterway.

The state Fish and Wildlife Department's plan to add sterile hatchery-raised rainbows to the Battenkill would further threaten the very treasure that makes the Battenkill so attractive to anglers. While some are happy to catch pellet-fed, hatchery-raised rainbows, many die-hard anglers recognize the challenge of fishing a wild river.

The short-term gains from stocking more fish could well destroy the long-term benefits of maintaining a healthy Battenkill with the wild trout that draw anglers -- and their economic boost -- from across the nation.

In addition, the stocked rainbows would probably crowd out the wild fish as they compete for the few hiding places. That's the last thing the wild trout need or deserve.

Finally, the river and its wildlife are already under great stress from both drought and high water. This is not the time to increase the pressure on the river's overall health or the fish trying to survive there.

Everyone shares the same goal, which is to rebuild the wild brown and brook trout populations and improve the health of the river for the long-term benefit of wildlife and anglers alike. The Fish and Wildlife Department needs to show a little patience to make this target a reality.

