

The Commissioner's View

Wild Trout Management

What Can We Do?

By Wayne Laroche

A lot of trout fishermen are happy when they hit their favorite stream and actually catch trout. Wild trout... stocked trout?... many of them don't care. Yet, some do care! There are some that relish the flashing strike and thrashing wriggle of those dark, brightly speckled beauties that inhabit the boiling upland streams of the Green Mountains. As I write this, it brings to mind the smell and rustle of trout in my creel from my younger days fishing in the headwaters of the Lamoille.

What is the status of wild trout in Vermont? What practical and feasible actions can we take to improve wild trout populations in Vermont? These are fair questions.

The ideal situation would be if we no longer had any need for fish hatcheries in the State of Vermont. If every lake and stream had habitat capable of producing and sustaining healthy, abundant trout populations, we could get rid of our hatcheries and save a lot of time and money. The problem is that many Vermont streams are no longer capable of producing and sustaining healthy, abundant trout populations year round.

Part of the problem with Vermont trout stream habitat is the result of activities of early European settlers. Between 1790 and 1840, about 80% of Vermont's forests were cleared and often burned. Sheep pastures reached the tops of many Vermont ridgelines. Flash floods resulted from lack of forest vegetation that previously impeded the flow. Stream banks and channels were scoured by fast flowing water. At the same time, sheep, cattle, and horses were pastured with free access to streams. As domestic animals walked into streams to drink, they broke down the stream banks.

The situation had to have been devastating to Vermont trout streams and native trout populations. Eroding soils and stream banks added sediment to streams. Streams respond predictably to increasing sediment loads. Pools fill in, banks erode away, spawning gravels become embedded with sand, and stream channels become wide and shallow. Depth, under-bank, and in-stream cover that trout rely on become extremely scarce. Fish no longer have places to hide from predators and rest when waters are swift. Removal of trees that shaded streams coupled with shallow water flowing through wide channels caused stream temperatures to soar. The lower reaches of many trout streams were largely destroyed as trout habitat.

Vermont has largely reverted back to forest to the benefit of our wild trout populations. A recent assessment of 17 states that historically supported wild brook trout populations ranks Vermont as one of the best in the Northeast. In addition, wild rainbow and brown trout populations have been established in many waters too warm for our native brook trout. Many of these populations are managed as wild trout fisheries and provide fishing opportunities that are prized by many anglers. While things are headed in the right direction, the new forests are relatively young and have not contributed the large logs and treetops to stream channels that are necessary for streams to restore natural stream channel conditions. The natural process may take hundreds of years given that humans permit trees to grow, fall into streams, and stay there.

So, what can we do? Can we reverse the degradation of the past and restore our streams so they can once

again support healthy, abundant wild trout populations?

Attempts to speed up this process have been undertaken in Vermont using modern stream restoration techniques. However, stream restoration projects are quite expensive. The cost limits their implementation. With the establishment of the Clean Water Act and Subsequent environmental regulations, our department is able to more effectively reduce new impacts to wild trout habitat. However, we cannot do this alone and will continue to rely on Vermonters to be good stewards of wild trout habitats.

Vermont's wild trout populations have been relatively stable for decades, although periodic fluctuations do occur. Some would like to see special regulations to protect wild trout. In some streams it is possible to promote wild trout fishing opportunities through special regulations. However, what some see as opportunity, others see as restriction.

The Fish & Wildlife Department will be looking for ways to enhance various fishing opportunities as we implement the trout management plan and continue to revise fishing regulations.

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