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Dixie Trout

By Ted Williams

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On a warm March morning I crouched beside a stream high in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, cradling a brook trout in the icy current. In sunlight, muted by the kind of cloud bank that gave these mountains their name, the belly of the little fish glowed with impossible shades of orange. The Yankee trout that I knew had two or three rows of red spots along their chestnut flanks, but this one had seven. The dorsal fin was broader and marked with strange but lovely black stripes. Underfins, with the familiar cream trim, seemed larger.

In the water two Park Service biologists, Matt Kulp and Joe Beeler, slogged around, stunning fish with 600 volts from gasoline-powered backpack generators. They were looking for rainbow trout and happy not to be finding them. Apparently rainbows had never been stocked here, and a downstream waterfall was keeping them out. In previous summers Kulp, Beeler and their colleagues had sorted out the rainbows from other park streams, releasing them below natural barriers. Why would they do such a thing when rainbows grow bigger, fight harder, and when the Park Service had gone to all the trouble and expense to plant them?

Well, values change. These days the mission of the Park Service, unique among state and federal agencies, is to preserve and restore "naturally functioning native ecosystems." Rainbow trout, which the park quit stocking in 1975, don't belong here. They evolved in the Pacific Northwest.

The slice of mountain sunrise I was holding in my hand quickly revived and darted back into the flow. At seven inches it was a giant among southern Appalachian brook trout—a subspecies isolated these past three million years in the high country of Virginia, Georgia, the Carolinas and Tennessee. Because of competition from the stronger, larger rainbows, this unique fish, the South's only native trout, is now confined to high-elevation streams where it is particularly vulnerable to acid rain. In Great Smoky Mountains National Park only about 15 percent of the brook trout are pure southerners because before 1975 the park also polluted its waters with brook trout of the northern race.

The restoration process has been arduous—a tough sell to anglers who lack what Aldo Leopold called an "ecological conscience." To many of them a trout is a trout, and "bigger" and "better" are synonyms. But a trout is no more a trout than a tree is a tree. In fact, a brook trout isn't a trout at all; it's a char descended from an Arctic char prototype landlocked by ancient glaciers. That's why it seeks out frigid water and why its generic name, *Salvelinus fontinalis*, means "dweller of springs." The vanishing southern subspecies is a national treasure, no less valuable than California's redwoods or Minnesota's timber wolves.

So far the park has restored 11.1 miles of brook trout habitat on nine streams. "We already had about 121 miles of brook trout water, and we're shooting to restore another 40 miles," says project leader Steve Moore. "Restoration of the rest of the original habitat [629 miles] just isn't practical." Among the reasons: lack of natural barriers and the proliferation of brown trout, aliens from Europe that can leap over waterfalls rainbows can't negotiate.

Sam's Creek, scene of the latest and most spectacular success, was too big to restore with just electroshocking. But when the park proposed to kill the rainbows with a selective, short-lived, utterly safe fish poison called Antimycin, some anglers were outraged. Last fall, after a painstaking environmental-review and public-comment process, the park completed the job, but not before shocking and evacuating most of the native brook trout and opening the stream to unrestricted rainbow fishing. Patient and intelligent public education, by the park and a private outfit aptly called Trout Unlimited, has turned attitudes around. When all comments were in, the approval rate for the first Antimycin treatment was 81 percent.

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Now anglers with new values are contributing money and time to save their native trout. Not because it is a better gamefish than the aliens that suppress it (it is smaller and weaker), not because it is more beautiful (although it is), but because it is part the South's purple, cloud-wrapped mountains and Earth's genetic wealth, because it belongs.