

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2001

FISH POISON POLITICS

Biologists often are hamstrung by paranoid opponents.

By Ted Williams

Fly Rod & Reel, March 2001

The most beautiful creature in Massachusetts, if you ask me, abides in Hyla Brook, an icy rill bright with cowslips and watercress, undefiled by hatchery trucks and, because Boston drinks it, embraced by big, roadless woods. And I'll go on to opine that the ugliest creature in Alberta abides in Moraine Lake - the 50-acre slab of polished turquoise you used to see on Canadian \$20 bills. In both cases I'm talking about fish - the same fish, the brook trout. Before managers started flinging them around the continent like wedding rice, they used to call them "Eastern brook trout."

Native ecosystems, like great works of art, can be rendered repulsive when smashed and smeared. Treasuring them is hardly a new or radical idea. More than 50 years ago Aldo Leopold advocated it when he called for an "ecological conscience." More than a century ago George Bird Grinnell, editor of the sporting weekly *Forest and Stream*, advocated it when he called for "a refined taste in natural objects." Today America and the rest of the world value fish and wildlife more than ever, but anything will do; there is scant concern for the conservation of genes or the sanctity of species.

One would expect that sportsmen, because they interact more directly with nature, would lead the effort to repair native ecosystems. Certainly this would be in their best interests. For one thing, fish and wildlife generally do better in their native habitats than do aliens that evolved elsewhere; witness, for example, Colorado's robust greenback cutthroat trout in the streams formerly polluted with scrawny, stunted browns, rainbows, hybrid cutts and brookies. But "better" means much more than increased size and condition of quarry. In healthy, native ecosystems the acts of hunting and fishing take on new meaning and significance; the sportsman becomes a true participant in nature instead of just another interloper in a ruined system.

Some sportsmen are indeed leading the way, but the majority can't educate the ecologically illiterate because they qualify as such themselves. With only a few exceptions, the sporting press doesn't provide them with useful information but instead plays to their fears and superstitions, the better to hawk ad space. Meanwhile, the chemophobic general public—no better served by its media—imagines that the short-lived and utterly benign chemical piscicides rotenone and antimycin are somehow going to pollute their surface and even ground water.

Where fisheries professionals have not been hamstrung, their work with chemical piscicides has produced spectacular results. In California alone, Little Kern and Volcano Creek golden trout, as well as Lahontan and Paiute cutthroats, owe their continued existence to the use of rotenone by state and federal agencies. A decade ago Utah spent \$3.7 million applying 878,000 pounds of powdered rotenone and 4,000 gallons of five-percent liquid rotenone to Strawberry Reservoir in order to provide a sanctuary for Bonneville cutthroat—presumed extinct until they were rediscovered in a few desert streams that still run into the dry basin of ancient Lake Bonneville. Since 1992 the wild Bonnevilles—which grow much larger than the introgressed and ill-adapted alien trout that had formerly populated the reservoir - have provided a sport fishery worth \$6 million a year.

The bull trout—a big, square-jawed char of western North America—is listed as threatened in the United States and as a "species of special concern" in Canada. One of its major problems (virtually its only problem in Canada's Banff National Park) is genetic swamping by brook trout. Brook trout—stocked in the days when managers, too, were ecologically illiterate—have taken over most of the park's streams and lakes. To its credit Canadian Heritage, the federal agency that oversees national parks in Canada, has decided that Banff's Moraine Lake should be as beautiful on the inside as it is on the outside. Four years ago it announced that the park should restore bull trout, Alberta's provincial fish. In order for this to happen brook trout and introgressed cutthroats and rainbows will have to be removed. Physically, the task won't be difficult. For one thing, it's a

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2001

headwater lake and its three feeder streams are too cold to support the alien trout with which it has been defiled. For another, it's small and easily accessible by truck and snowmobile. Politically, however, the task may be impossible.

If you would like to learn about proposed bull trout restoration in Moraine Lake, don't read Real Fishing Magazine. "Trout genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" is what editor Craig Ritchie calls it. "No one," he wrote in the April 2000 issue, "knows how long it will take insects, amphibians, plants, aquatic invertebrates, birds and other creatures that will be killed off in the process to repopulate—or even if they will."

But people who read the literature do know. Amphibians, few of which are killed by rotenone and fewer still by antimycin, bounce right back, as do the few insects and other invertebrates that are killed. Piscicides don't affect birds or plants, though I suppose it's conceivable that a plant or two or a bird or two might be killed if explosives are used in conjunction with chemicals. The real motive of Parks Canada, Ritchie averred, is that it "wants to outlaw fishing, and this is a way of pushing it through." But fishing—including catch-and-release for bull trout—is part of Banff National Park's plan, a plan approved by Parliament. The park couldn't change that plan even if it wanted to—and it doesn't want to, says Charlie Pacas, the biologist who will head bull trout restoration if it ever happens. Ritchie says he never contacted Pacas or any other Banff official (the only thing Pacas agrees with him on). However, Ritchie did tell me he erred in reporting that TU Canada (which he also failed to contact) is an enthusiastic accomplice in the proposed trout genocide. He says he's since learned that "TU is very much opposed." But even this turns out to be untrue. While TU Canada heartily endorses "recovery efforts for native species at risk such as bull trout," it has no official position on what's been proposed for Lake Moraine, because there is as yet no written plan.

Ritchie has succeeded in whipping up Citizens for Private Property Rights, based in Santa Ysabel, California. "Brook trout," the group sardonically proclaims, "are bad, evil trout and must be eliminated and . . . bull trout are ever so much more precious in God's eye." And the Canadian Taxpayers Federation echoes Ritchie in calling bull trout restoration "ethnic cleansing." The Canadian Alliance Party calls the proposal "obscure" and worries that it could offend "the animal-rights people," not explaining why anyone should care. If the Canadian Alliance Party cares, then it has reason for concern: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals-whose members don't give a damn what kind of animals inhabit the planet so long as none of them die-calls the proposal "cruel" and declares that it is "unconscionable" to kill one species so that another may live.

When I interviewed Brad Bischoff, the media point man at Banff, he seemed jumpy as a dusted grouse. "Any decision we make will be posted for public comment, and no final decisions are going to be made until those public comments are reviewed," he told me. About the third time he said the park hadn't made any final decision, I began to wonder if it ever would.

Neither an ecological conscience nor a refined taste in natural objects is more apparent south of the Canadian border. American sportsmen, flimflammed by special interests and deceived by their own media, are in a hissy fit about Montana's proposal to create a 77-mile sanctuary for westslope cutthroat trout on upper Cherry Creek—a Madison River tributary currently infested with brook trout and introgressed rainbows and Yellowstone cutts [see Short Casts, Jan/Feb]. Herewith, some brief background: Westslope cutts, petitioned for threatened status under the Endangered Species Act, have been eliminated from all but two percent of their historic range in the upper Missouri River system. The Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks—among the nation's more enlightened state resource agencies—has committed itself to a recovery plan whereby 10 healthy westslope populations will be established in five distinct drainages, each at least 50 miles long. "We'll keep monitoring for surviving fish, and if necessary, we'll do more treatments," says project leader Pat Clancey. "Right now we plan on doing treatments two years in a row." While the department hopes to avoid the expense and red tape of federal listing, its commitment to the project is based on the belief that saving this lovely and unique subspecies is simply the right thing to do.

Because of a 25-foot waterfall on its downstream end, the project area had been fishless until about 80 years ago, when it was first stocked with trout. So critics are correct when they say westslopes were never part of upper Cherry Creek's native fauna. On the other hand, westslopes belong in the Missouri watershed; rainbows,

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2001

brookies and Yellowstone cutts do not; and there aren't many good barrier-equipped westslope sanctuaries available. The naturalized aliens now caught in the system evolved in lower, warmer, wetter conditions; a fish of 12 inches is a trophy. I've fished smaller streams where westslopes average 12 inches.

If you seek balanced perspective and accurate information on the project, don't read *Outdoor Life*, which, in June 1999, ran an article with the inflammatory and misleading title "Playing God on Cherry Creek." The text, also inflammatory, relies heavily on sources who lack scientific credentials (but not opinions) and recycles their rumors, often with no attribution. For example, it states that if a bear eats the poisoned fish, "it could become sick." Decades of scientific literature demonstrate that this is nonsense. "Both antimycin and rotenone will also exterminate the stream's aquatic insect populations," it asserts. But these chemicals kill very few insects, and populations that are reduced recover in a few months. It wrongly reports that "a lawsuit has been filed to halt the project on the grounds that it violates the federal Clean Water Act." Then in a grotesque mime of objective journalism, the editors invite readers to vote for or against the project. Surprise: 98 percent were opposed.

Readers of *Range Magazine* were served as badly. In the Winter 2000 issue the Forest Service, a partner in the project, is accused of "contradicting" the Wilderness Act; but the act provides for exactly this sort of management. The article asserts that if even one of the grayling that were once stocked in Cherry Creek (and never again seen alive) turns up dead, the project "would be illegal on its face, directly afoul of the Endangered Species Act." But grayling aren't even listed. *Range* reports that Fish, Wildlife and Parks failed to procure "a discharge permit that the Clean Water Act requires before any foreign 'pollutant' can be put into waters." But such permits aren't needed for chemical piscicides. *Range* reports that Cherry Creek "could be used as a natural hatchery, providing highly adapted eggs to help restore Yellowstone cutts to other, similarly demanding high-country environments." But the resident cutts are mongrels and don't belong in this part of the state anyway. When I asked Clancey why he hadn't explained all this to *Range Magazine* he said that no one from the publication had ever contacted him or anyone else in the department.

Instead, *Range* relied on rumors provided by the two maestros of opposition - William Fairhurst, president of the Public Lands Access Association, and attorney Alan Joscelyn, who represents Montana's cyanide, heap-leach mines. By filing an appeal with the state Board of Environmental Review, Fairhurst and Joscelyn managed to keep the project from proceeding on schedule in 2000; and, although the appeal was dismissed last September, the board has put a stay on restoration work so Fairhurst and Joscelyn can take their case to district court. If they do this, and apparently they intend to, they may delay restoration yet another year. Fairhurst is in a snit because something like 70 percent of the project area is on the ranch of media mogul and fish-and-wildlife restoration hero Ted Turner who, like many Montanans, doesn't invite the general public onto his land and who is picking up \$343,350 of the project's \$475,000 tab. Joscelyn has fleas in his shorts because Turner funds the environmental groups that keep suing the polluters he represents. Ted Turner, Fairhurst tells the press, is "playing God in Montana." He submits that westslope restoration on Cherry Creek is actually a plot keep the public out of the entire watershed.

Fairhurst recently joined the Montana Mining Association, which has come out against westslope restoration on grounds that the project supposedly will "poison a public water supply"-even though the association has successfully lobbied for weaker water-quality standards and even though its members have done plenty of water poisoning themselves. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Fairhurst told *The Bozeman Chronicle*. In July 1999, when Jill Andrews was the Mining Association's director, she revealed her outfit's real motive in a statement to *The Montana Standard*: "He [Turner] funds 350 of those [environmental] organizations. They oppose almost everything we try to do."

The entire quantity of chemicals from which Fairhurst, Joscelyn and the Montana Mining Association say they want to protect the public is 20 gallons of antimycin and 10 gallons of rotenone, to be delivered to the main stem and all feeder streams of the 77-mile-long drainage over the course of two years. The stuff breaks down in hours and isn't toxic to people. Chemical control of unwanted fish by professional managers has been happening in North America since 1934 without a single documented human injury.

Today most managers perceive the importance of native ecosystems, but when they try to restore them they often get lynched by the mob. In 1994 pike, unleashed by some bucket biologist, turned up in 4,000-acre Lake Davis, which supplies water to about 2,500 people in north-central California. The lake—extremely fertile and, in

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2001

its shallow sections, full of aquatic plants - is the quintessential pike factory; and it connects to the San Joaquin and Sacramento River systems, where endangered races of chinook salmon and steelhead still cling to existence. Accordingly, the California Dept. of Fish and Game launched an expensive but practical plan to rotenone Lake Davis, after which it would stock rainbows that grow as fast in the lake as they do in the hatchery. This time sportsmen were on board, but from the way the general public reacted you'd have thought the state had proposed atmospheric nuclear testing.

As Fish and Game prepared to deliver the rotenone in October 1997, locals held protest marches and all-night candlelight vigils along the lake shore. "Burn in Hell, Fish & Game!" shrieked one placard. Some protesters wept; others cursed; still others donned wetsuits and swam out into the 52-degree water, where they chained themselves to a buoy. When Fish and Game agents unchained the swimmers, shore-based protesters shouted, "Shame, shame." For crowd control the state deployed 270 uniformed officers consisting of Highway Patrolmen, game wardens, Fish and Game biologists and technicians, and deputies from the Plumas County Sheriff's office. A two-man SWAT team took up positions on a water tank.

As frequently happens with big fish reclamations, not all the rotenone was neutralized as it flowed down the outlet, and some hatchery rainbows and browns expired along several miles of Big Grizzly Creek, which hadn't been fit for even stocked trout before the dam went in. It wasn't a big deal, basically a cost of doing business. But the Plumas County District Attorney filed criminal charges (promptly dismissed) against Fish and Game and three of its employees. The City of Portola filed a \$2 million claim in preparation for a civil lawsuit alleging that the state deprived citizens of their right to safe drinking water. The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board hit Fish and Game with a \$250,000 administrative fine, which it was allowed to pay by stocking extra trout (many more than it had accidentally killed) and doing habitat restoration along Big Grizzly Creek. A sign over a Portola restaurant proclaimed: "We don't serve Fish and Game." Angry, grossly ill-informed locals pushed through a law stipulating that henceforth the Dept. of Health Services, not Fish and Game, would be in charge of any chemical treatment of drinking water. "What we're hearing from sources inside the Bush administration is not good at all," comments Melinda Kassen, who runs TU's Colorado Western Water Project.

The hassle, horrendous though it was, seemed to have been worth it. The endangered Sacramento and San Joaquin salmonids appeared to be safe from the saber-tooth aliens. But then in May 1999 pike - stocked by angry residents or missed by the rotenone—again turned up in Lake Davis. After a five-year pummeling by the public and the press Fish and Game had no more belly for confrontation, and who can blame it? The ignorati had won. Now the department proposes a "multi-faceted" plan - devised by a team dominated by city, county and state bureaucrats who wouldn't know a trout from a pout - whereby pike are to be removed by barriers, drawdowns, explosives, electro-fishing and nets. Fish and Game admits that the plan won't eliminate pike, just knock them way down. But removing most of an alien population is like amputating most of a gangrenous appendage; it doesn't accomplish a whole lot.

Here, from a letter to the California Fish and Game Dept., is what the California-Nevada chapter of the American Fisheries Society thinks of this approach: "We believe any action less than eradication is in violation of state law and biologically and ecologically irresponsible It is clear to us that little or no sound fishery science has been used to develop this plan. It appears the Department has adopted objectives, control techniques, and monitoring programs based on consensus of non-biologists. In doing so, the Department has abdicated its legal and professional responsibilities."

Too bad that fisheries professionals are getting beaten down as they labor to repair the remnants of humanity's only real wealth. Strange that the public should pay for the education of fisheries professionals, pay for their salaries and benefits, pay for their buildings and equipment, then push them aside and undertake fisheries management itself. But not at all strange that native fish should then flicker out.