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Why Fly-Fishers Hate Ted Turner

For too many fly-fishers, the definition of doing something for fly-fishing isn't ensuring their sport by saving a part of earth's genetic wealth. It's inviting them onto private property to angle for weed fish.

By Ted Williams

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In January 2002 Fly Rod & Reel magazine made Ted Turner its angler of the year, thereby unleashing a blizzard of nasty-grams. Most correspondents opened with harangues about Turner's liberal politics, then alleged that he's done nothing for fly-fishing. Fly Rod & Reel, mailed six times a year to 62,000 subscribers, pays me about \$37 a day if you divide dollars earned for my 3,000-word column by days worked. But it's one of the few hook-and-bullet magazines that publishes investigative reporting on gut environmental issues or dares to criticize sportsmen when they climb into bed with their worst enemies.

Not coincidentally, the magazine is one of the very few hook-and-bullet publications that is profitable and rowing. There are lots of facts sportsmen don't want to know, but there are also lots of sportsmen who crave instruction on how to help fish and wildlife.

For 15 years my assignment has been to promote native fish restoration. So when Ted Turner offered to host and underwrite the most ambitious project ever undertaken to save westslope cutthroat trout, I jumped on the story. The fish has been nearly extirpated by professional and amateur bucket-biologists who have polluted its habitat with trout that don't belong. Westslope cutthroats are suppressed by browns from Europe and brook trout from the East or hybridized out of existence by rainbows from the Pacific Northwest and other cutthroats from around the West.

Accordingly, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks hatched a recovery plan whereby 10 healthy westslope populations will be established in five distinct drainages. By far the most promising sanctuary is upper Cherry Creek in southwest Montana. The department wants to use the safe and short-lived chemicals rotenone and antimycin to kill the brook trout, rainbows and Yellowstone cutthroats that currently infest its 77 miles. Then it would release westslopes.

Turner, who owns much of the watershed and has done a spectacular job restoring it, has agreed to pick up \$343,350 of the \$475,000 tab. You'd think fly-fishers would be ecstatic. After all, westslope cutthroats evolved in these streams and grow faster and bigger than the aliens. But there's a more important consideration: When a person fishes in degraded habitat for fish that don't belong, fly-fishing is a mere "sport"—like bowling. When a person pursues wild, native fish in pristine habitat, fly-fishing becomes more meaningful, and the fly-fisher is elevated to a participant in nature instead of being just a taker.

But, like the people Ted Turner bought his ranch from, he puts up no trespassing signs, so on most of his land you have to wade or float Cherry Creek to fish. Angry at the inconvenience, local guides and anglers have spread the untruth that Turner has thrown in with the Mountain States Legal Foundation to overturn Montana's stream access law.

First to attack Turner for the sin of exercising his property rights was a property rights group called the Public Lands Access Association. Its unsuccessful state lawsuit (alleging that rotenone and antimycin are pollution) and its threatened federal lawsuit have held up the restoration project since Oct. 31, 2000. Recycling the association's fantasies has been Outdoor Life magazine, in which sources utterly bereft of credentials but not opinions whoop it up for alien and mongrel trout.

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While Fly Rod & Reel heard from Turner's supporters, too, they were out-shouted. We were informed that we were "butt kissing," that we "might better have selected Osama bin Laden," that Turner "could care less about native trout...unless it might apply to his own delusional self-image, possible tax breaks or increased wealth," that he is a "land hoarder," a "terrorist," a "leftist elitist."

The angler of the year isn't picked by me, but somehow the choice of a native-fish-loving land poster was deemed my fault. My "selection" of Turner proved the following: I had "a political agenda," I'd done it for money, I was a "snot nose," a "moron," a "Nature Nazi," an acolyte of "Hanoi Jane," an espouser of "vitriolic leftist environmentalism," a "nasty bully," "the James Carville of the fly-fishing world." For too many fly-fishers, the definition of doing something for fly-fishing isn't ensuring their sport by saving a part of earth's genetic wealth. It's inviting them onto private property to angle for weed fish.

I'd say my \$37-a-day work trying to convince sportsmen that native fish are worth saving isn't going to be finished real soon. Meanwhile, one fly-fisherman needs to say thanks to Ted Turner. Ted, thanks!