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Our Turn: Management of state's native fish needs reform

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For the Monitor

Aug. 1 is Respect for Fish Day, a national day of action to increase appreciation for fish as individuals and essential members of their aquatic ecosystem communities.

Over the past decade a large body of scientific evidence demonstrating that fish are sentient, cognitively complex animals has come forward, and according to the American Veterinary Medical Association fish “should be accorded the same considerations as terrestrial vertebrates in regard to relief from pain.”

Unfortunately, this scientific consensus isn't reflected in public policy and the welfare and conservation of fish is often neglected. This problem is embodied in the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department's management of our state's wild fish populations, particularly its liberal hatchery stocking program and under-protection of native brook trout.



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Brook trout are New Hampshire's official freshwater fish but are in jeopardy due to water pollution, habitat destruction, invasive species, and overfishing.

The department's Wild Trout Management Program protects water bodies inhabited by wild brook trout. Water bodies with a specified density of wild trout (13 pounds/acre) receive protections. Unfortunately, this program is neglected by the department. There are only 16 designated water bodies of the 222 ponds and 1,200 miles of rivers and streams inhabited by trout. No new ones have been added in more than 13 years, despite many additional bodies meeting these criteria.

For instance, the department's own data shows that portions of the Wildcat River have enough wild trout to qualify for protection, but no action has been taken to nominate them. There are also no designated water bodies in multiple locations, like the White Mountain National Forest, which are rich in wild trout.

Instead of supporting native fish conservation, the department directs its inland fisheries budget toward hatchery facilities that raise trout and other fish species, some of which are not native. These hatcheries are essentially underwater factory farms that confine fish in overcrowded, unnatural conditions, to artificially stock New Hampshire's lakes, rivers, and streams. Millions of hatchery fish are released into water bodies across our state to the detriment of native fish. Hatchery fish compete with native fish for scarce resources, spread diseases, and prey on native fish offspring. They also breed with native fish and reduce their genetic diversity. For these reasons, releasing hatchery fish in water bodies protected by the Wild Trout Management Program is forbidden.

Additionally, the hatcheries are themselves unsustainable. Large quantities of herring, anchovies, and other wild fish are overfished and turned into pellets to feed hatchery fish. Some hatcheries discharge pollution in the form of drugs (given to fish to keep them alive in poor conditions) and phosphorus from fish waste and uneaten feed. This pollution induces environmental harms like toxic algae and oxygen depletion that can kill fish and make the water unsafe for recreation.

A prime example is the Merrymeeting River, where the Powder Mill Hatchery is the single largest polluter.

This system may seem perplexing, but its roots are straightforward. The department relies on revenue from sportfishing licenses and people who purchase those licenses expect immediate, predictable opportunities to catch fish. Hatchery fish are suitable for this purpose since the department can deposit large quantities of them in water bodies and tell anglers exactly where and when to find them. Hatchery fish are also easier to catch since they are domestic, unprepared for life in the wild, and ill-suited to escaping pursuers. Wild fish swim away from shadows on the water surface because they associate them with predators but hatchery fish swim up to shadows since they associate them with being fed. Most released hatchery fish die from hunger, exposure, and predation long before they can be caught by anglers.

Capturing these disoriented animals is akin to “hunting” cows and chickens. Wild fish are harder to catch and therefore less useful in terms of selling licenses, so their conservation takes a backseat.

This status quo is objectively irrational and harmful. The department must downsize its unsustainable, inhumane hatcheries and redirect funding toward the protection of native fish and expansion of the Wild Trout Management Program. All New Hampshire water bodies inhabited by native trout must be evaluated in a timely fashion to ensure that all ponds, rivers, and streams meeting the criteria for designation get the protections they are entitled to.

More broadly, the department must stop managing our state's fish solely as a resource for anglers and a source of revenue. It must recognize that fish are individuals who play organic roles in their ecological communities and have inherent value. These reforms will lead to better stewardship of the state's aquatic ecosystems and, by extension, improved quality of life for all New Hampshire citizens.

(Linda Dionne is president of Voices of Wildlife in New Hampshire. James Glover is president of the New Hampshire Animal Rights League. Jack Hurley is president of Twin States Animal Liberation. Shimon Shuchat is campaign coordinator of In Defense of Animals.)

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