



Cross Currents

November, 2002

M i d - M i s s o u r i C h a p t e r , T r o u t U n l i m i t e d



WINTER TROUT PARK CATCH-AND-RELEASE FISHING

The Rest of the Story

Looking back now about 25 years helps to put Missouri's winter trout park catch-and-release season in perspective. Most trout anglers have come to enjoy this great program, and most take it for granted. It wasn't always this way, and even now, the winter trout park season could be improved.

I joined the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) in February of 1969 and later that first year, I wondered out loud why MDC closed the trout parks at the end of October and reopened them March

first. Hatchery managers told me they needed time to regroup from the busy, summer season; spawn brood stock and rear the resulting fry and fingerlings for the next year's trout supply, without the pressure of having anglers fishing the parks. Conservation agents told me they were too busy attending to the many hunting seasons to also enforce trout regulations at trout parks during the winter.

Reading between the lines, our trout park hatchery managers liked the time off granted by closing the trout parks for four months; conservation agents viewed any additional programs as more work; and fisheries administrators weren't interested in providing more recreational opportunities fearing any change could backfire (not work) and reflect badly on them. This was and is common human behavior. One manager told me in small biting words that it would be a "cold day in Hell" when he opened "his" trout park in the winter. Fortunately, he retired.

How do you change a program and modify old ideas? How do you move that proverbial "immoveable rock" which had been in place since the 1920s and an important part of MDC's fisheries program since 1937?

In 1970, there was very little angler interest in catch-and-release trout fishing. The outside lobby supporting Missouri's trout program, the Missouri Trout Fishermen's Association (MTFA), had four chapters each associated with a trout park. Members each year

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at the Conservation Federation of Missouri (CFM) annual meeting lobbied for increased stocking; argued about specific zones at each park associated with fishing tackle and method; discussed endlessly definitions of what constitutes a fly; asked for more or less fish cleaning stations; argued the pros and cons of dredging; and asked each year for more enforcement at Missouri's trout parks. And, each year, MDC administrators and biologists, me included, would put on a dog-and-pony show, for the most part, defending the status quo.

Agencies, bureaucracies everywhere, resist change. This is the first law of a bureaucracy. Change comes slowly and comes from two sources: 1) a groundswell of interested clients outside an agency lobbying for a change; and 2) an informed individual or group of individuals within an agency, actively working for a change.

My first task was to inform or educate MTFA members and anyone else who would listen to me, about the potential at Missouri trout parks, currently going unused. I went on the rubber chicken circuit of MTFA chapters and conservation organizations, garden clubs...heck I'd talk to any group that would feed me and provide an opportunity to talk...talking about Missouri's trout program, its history, status, and most importantly, the potential for future improvements. We covered trout park operations, brown trout management; wild trout fishing potentials; enforcement and a host of free-wheeling subjects. Many of you probably heard my presentations.

Fun, heady times, and it worked. Individuals and groups began to question why MDC closed the trout parks in the winter and why they couldn't be opened to catch-and-release fishing.

Within the Department my lobbying for winter fishing at the trout parks continued. I'm not sure if the hatchery superintendents became tired of my lobbying or Fisheries Division received enough outside interest from trout anglers; regardless, we moved ahead with

an experimental winter, catch-and-release season at Bennett Spring, followed the next year by similar openings at the other three trout parks. Ron McCullough, new hatchery manager at Bennett Spring, stepped forward and agreed to try this new program. And, as they say, "the rest is history."

It worked, but not without a great deal of gnashing of teeth and minor obstacles thrown up to overcome, thrown up by managers and local agents. How do we monitor fishing pressure and success — a winter fishing tag with a mandatory survey at the end of the day. How do we enforce compliance with the regulation — turned out to not be a problem. How do we keep track of anglers spread out in a trout park — limited fishing to one or two zones, where they can be watched. How do we get our other work done — limit the program to weekends and added temporary staff to handle anglers checking in each day. How do we raise more trout to meet the needs of this new fishery — carryover from the catch season, supplemented once or twice during the winter provided more than enough trout for the program; few trout died. In addition, managers found they could cycle old brood stock through the fishery, providing an added bonus for winter anglers and still be available for the March opener.

All fears turned out to be groundless. Anglers responded to the new winter fishery. Use at one point was increasing at 17 percent per year, making it the fastest growing segment of Missouri's trout program.

After several years, Missouri's winter catch-and-release fishery has settled into a three-day a week program, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, with licenses being available through vendors, as are other licenses, with additional areas at the parks opened as use increased.

The future

This has been a very successful program...as was predicted...yet it is limited to weekends only. There is no reason not to have the parks open 7 days per

week, not just three, and there is no reason not to allow anglers to fish all areas of the trout parks. Surveys have shown that although the heaviest use would still be on weekends, some anglers would fish during the week, and the largest complaint from anglers has been the increasing crowds at the fishery. Opening all areas in the parks would help eliminate some of the crowding. This seems like a common sense change that could be easily made by the Department of Conservaton, which would pay large benefits – benefits to anglers; benefits to MDC in good will; and more great winter trout fishing.

And now you know the rest of the story.

- SPENCER TURNER



The winter catch-and-release season begins November 8th at Bennett Spring, Maramec Spring, Montauk, and Roaring River

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Be Thankful

Here is an early holiday present for all of us. We are very lucky to have in our chapter, in TU, and on this planet, Spence Turner. Through his successful career he piloted programs that have given our parents, our children, and us something to enjoy.

We have all fished Bennett Spring and the other Missouri trout parks. As you read this newsletter, the catch-and-release season is about to begin. Do you know how this winter wonderland period began? Do you want to know the rest of the story? Sit back, read Spence's article and enjoy.

Sit back and think about this too: I just received a "please remove David's name from your mailing list" note from a local member's family. The message read, "He drowned while fishing. The waders he was wearing played a big part in his death." This sobering request was followed by "Please keep yourselves safe. God bless."

So, as you gather with friends and family at Thanksgiving, think of these two stories and learn from them.

- JEFF WITTEN

MMTU CALENDAR

November 5, 7:30 p.m. Presentation on their 2002 Alaska trip, by Bob Hook, Jim Bridges, and Jon Deal. (Chapter officers have two-year terms. The next election will be in November of 2003.)

December 3, 7:30 p.m. 7:30 Photo contest

January 7, 2003, 7:30 p.m. TBA

February 27, 2003 (Thursday) Annual banquet. Holiday Inn Executive Center, Columbia. Details to be announced.

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Cross Currents, the Mid-Missouri Chapter of Trout Unlimited newsletter, has a circulation of approximately 300. Regular chapter meetings are on the first Tuesday of each month, except for July. The meeting place is usually the Missouri Department of Conservation Fisheries Research Facility at Stadium and College in Columbia, Missouri. Meeting time is 7:30 p.m. See the newsletter for any changes.

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