

When Greatness Crumbles

The Battenkill's roller coaster ride

The Battenkill is Vermont's best known stream and arguably the best known of all New England rivers. Two main branches, the West Branch and the East Branch meet in Manchester and their combined flows run south through Sunderland to Arlington. In route it is flanked on the west by the Taconic Range whose dominating feature is the 3,816 foot Mt. Equinox, while on the east it is flanked by the Green Mountains. At Arlington the river turns sharply west, flowing through West Arlington to enter New York state where its journey will ultimately end as it drops into the Hudson River near Schuylerville, New York.

Despite the growth and commercialization of Manchester, fishing the river seems a world apart as it flows quietly and sure in its downstream progress. As a generally low gradient river the wading fisherman has few rapid stretches to contend with and this low gradient also makes the Battenkill a fine water for canoes, kayaks and tubers. In West Arlington the river is bordered by Route 313 heading towards New York state. There are also several bridge crossings along this stretch of river and on the other side is a well maintained dirt road. This six or seven mile stretch has excellent river access, sees the most fishing pressure, and the most canoe/kayak and tubing pressure.

The Battenkill has always had the reputation of a river with an unpredictability about it. This enigmatic quality however was the challenge that made the Battenkill different and better to me than other rivers.

The 1980's and 90's brought change. More so than usual. We were catching fewer but larger fish. We weren't seeing the smaller fish that always had made up the bulk of the fishery. Something was different. Confirmation came in the spring of 1998 with the release of preliminary findings from a decade

long survey by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. A couple of their findings concluded in 1988 a total of 12,396 trout had been caught while last year (1997) only 1,849 trout were taken. Catch rates per hour of effort had fallen dramatically and there was an amazing 71 percent decline in angler participation.

Throughout this period, there was a large increase in the number of canoes and tubers using the river. With concerns being raised at all levels about what was happening, the Town of Arlington commissioned a Battenkill River Visitor Study by Robert E. Manning, University of Vermont, School of Natural Resources. The report was issued in October 1993. The final paragraph concluded in part "Finally, study results suggest the river is currently at or near its recreational carrying



In its prime, the Battenkill was considered New England's premiere trout stream. In 1988, creel surveys indicated 12,396 trout were caught by fishermen. In 1997, that number dipped to 1,849. The decline didn't happen overnight, yet many were still caught by surprise. Photo courtesy of Jeremy Baker.

capacity. River users now see, on the average, more canoeists, kayakers and tubers than they feel is acceptable. However, the number of anglers seen is below the level felt to be acceptable. Many respondents reported the behavior of river users to be more objectionable than their sheer numbers."

In response to the declining productivity the Department of Fish and Wildlife proposed a special test water/slot limit on two miles of river in West Arlington. At a contentious public meeting in 1992 they were presented with 480 signatures on a petition opposing special test water regulations. With no further improvement in the fishery, the slot limit proposal resurfaced and went into effect from 1994-1998. Again there was no improvement in the fishery, thus a new catch and release rule was signed into being by then Commissioner Ron Regan. The river from Dufresne Pond Dam in Manchester downstream to the New York state line was designated Test Water from April 8th, 2000 to December 31st, 2005. During this period, all trout caught must be released. This regulation was

extended another year, to December 31st, 2006. There were no restrictions on type of tackle used as long as the fish caught were immediately released. At this time a team of fishery and aquatic scientists were set up to look into possible factors that may be contributing to the fisheries decline. Ultimately, 14 possible factors were studied, but the major finding seemed to be a lack of cover which for the trout was the leading cause of the decline. Simply stated, trout require about ten percent of the stream to have cover of overhanging shade, deep pools or woody debris, and undercut banks to protect against heat, predators and floods, as well as providing a good habitat for feeding.

That begs the questions "where did the cover go?" After all, woody debris doesn't get up and walk away. The answer was primarily the responsibility of recreational floaters. There are some Battenkill flats that are shallow across most of the river but have a fairly narrow deep channel near one bank or the other. It was these deeper channels that everyone had to use, the canoers to float downstream, the fishermen who stood in the shallower flats and cast towards these deeper runs and, of course, the fish who had found the refuge, cover, predator protection and depth they required. Cutting streamside cover, and removing sunken logs and other woody debris changed everything, especially for the trout. What they needed was no longer there in many stream sections.

There is currently a Twin Rivers Battenkill Restoration Project now underway in West Arlington, and some 40 in-stream structures will be installed over the next two years. The expectations are that after about five years there will be a 10 to 50 percent increase in the local trout populations. I doubt it will take that long based on what I have seen in a Pennsylvania stream improvement project.

Finally, there was a proposal recently put forth by Vermont Fish and Wildlife to stock 1,000 sterile rainbow trout to provide a fishery until the Battenkill restoration projects really took hold. At a recent public hearing, I believe 32 people had an opportunity to voice their opinion, 28 vetoed the idea, only four spoke in favor. Although we have not heard the official verdict, every indication is fish and wildlife has backed off that sterile rainbow trout introduction. And well they should, I have caught sterile triploid rainbows in South Africa and they grow rapidly and since there is no interruption in their lifestyle for spawning and reproduction, they become in effect, "eating machines." Hardly what the Battenkill needs at this point in its recovery process.

It's been a convoluted process but finally, it seems the river will be properly managed and a common sense "resource first" management process will restore this river to its former productivity. And by the way, don't hesitate to fish it right now, there's some husky browns and brookies swimming in those clear waters. Perhaps I'll see you there.



Bill Cairns, a noted author on the subject of fly-fishing, lives in Manchester VT, and witnessed the Battenkill's decline first hand. He will also be there for it's return to greatness.