

Battenkill: Past and Future

by Bill Cairns

Part one of three

Reprinted with permission from **Outdoors Magazine**. Originally appeared in Bill Cairn's monthly column, "*Flies on the Water*", September 2006

The early warning signs of a river in decline saw fewer fish coming to flies, lures and bait. River regulars had their fears confirmed in the spring of 1988 with the release of the preliminary findings of a survey done by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. Among the findings, the number of trout caught on the Battenkill decreased by 93 percent in the decade long survey. In 1988, a total of 12,396 trout were caught, while last year (1997) 1,849 were caught. The number of fish larger than 10 inches fell by as much as 89 percent in some stretches of the river. Also, the catch rate had gone from 0.69 fish per hour to 0.17 fish per hour. It's not too surprising to also note the number of hours anglers spent on the river declined as well from 17,965 hours in 1988 to 5,152 in 1997. An amazing 71 percent decline in angler participation.

The fishery was also the subject of an article in **Yankee Magazine** (May 1996) by William Tapply, a well-known outdoor writer. In it he noted, "After three days on the river I had seen enough to understand that the Battenkill has the potential to match some of the most productive trout waters I have fished. Trout reproduce abundantly here. But they are overfished and overharvested and undermanaged." He went on to say, "Its fish are scarcer and smaller and more skittish than the quality of this river promises."

There was also a large increase in the number of canoes and tubers using the river. Resource managers agree that conflict between recreationists is one of the thorniest problems with which they must contend.

What appeared to be happening is called "displacement" and described as "those persons feeling stress (and I would add a lack of productivity for their efforts i.e. fishermen) will discontinue their participation in a conflict producing situation." Alternate users (canoes and tubers) then gain the share of time and space of those who have deserted an activity, thus becoming pre-emptive users.

I would add I also own a canoe.

It is claimed that surface activity has no bearing on a trout fishery and the only mention of a study during a public hearing that I attended made reference to bass, not trout as this aspect of "pressure" has been little studied. Yet, observations by Bachman reported in *Foraging Behavior of Free-Ranging Brown Trout (Transactions of the American Fisheries Society, January 1984)* noted "overhead flight of a large bird such as a mallard or common grackle typically caused a wild brown trout to dart to one side or another and become motionless with its body pressed tightly to the substrata. Without further stimulus the fish would usually return to its foraging site and resume feeding within 3 to 5 minutes. But stronger stimulus such as a mallard landing could put a fish down for 20 to 30 minutes and one fish remained along and partly under a flat rock for about 2 hours."

Obviously wild brown trout that have eluded anglers and predators for a few years are cautious and extremely aware of nearby or overhead activity such as canoeing and tubing. And even if a negative response can't be proven to everyone's satisfaction it certainly can't be said to have a positive response.

Ultimately a special test water, slot limit-proposal was offered. It involved a two mile section of the Battenkill and included a requirement to release all trout measuring 10 to 14 inches, reduce the trout/angler/day creel limit to three trout per day and limit angling to the use of artificial lures and flies only. The department's objectives were to reduce the early season harvest and retain more catchable size fish in the population through a longer portion of the fishing season, increase the number of quality size (10 to 14 inch trout) in the population and trophy size (over 14 inch) available to be caught and harvested, and finally, to increase the average catch rate.

Sounds sort of like mom, apple pie and the Fourth of July doesn't it. Who wouldn't want such objectives met. Well, for starters there were 480 local resident signatures on a petition that found reason to disagree. One resident (quoted in **The Bennington Banner** March 27, 1992) ultimately said, "You have created a conflict among fishermen and with the town. We don't need outside interference and we don't want this rammed down our throats."

I would add I also wrote about this hearing in **The Manchester Journal** of March 31, 1992 in an article entitled "How Do We Ensure Quality Fishing?"

There's more to come next issue including my thoughts on rainbows in the 'kill.

This article originally appeared in the
XXXXX 2006 issue of **Outdoors Magazine**
and is reprinted here with their permission and
the permission of the author.

