



Fish liberation: Historic trout stocking gets under way

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Newburyport Current

Posted Apr 30, 2010 @ 11:45 AM

Newburyport — Men stand with white buckets on the side of Route 1 in Byfield.

Fish are scooped out of a tank wedged into the back of a pickup truck. They plop into the waiting water in the buckets. An errant trout falls out and is deftly scooped up, then re-deposited in the water.

The buckets are quickly carried down a dirt embankment where the tidal Mill River waits lazily below. The rain has lifted but clouds still hang low in the sky. The smell of dirt and the sounds of seabirds mingle in the air.

Men in waders, overalls and baseball hats ferry the fish into the water. They step nimbly over to waiting stocking pens or other containers nestled in canoes. Buckets are poured swiftly into these receptacles. The fish plop out again. Soon they will travel by canoe into the nearby marsh, into the salt water, into the wild.

Today, these trout are being liberated.

Fishermen, river advocates and nature lovers gathered April 23 to free the fish.

Organizers got a "fish liberation" permit from the state to allow for the stocking. And, they say, it's a historic moment for the North Shore.

It could be considered a homecoming of sorts for the sea-run trout, which were hatched and nurtured by Barbara and Wayne Miller at Blue Stream Hatchery in West Barnstable. The fish, also known as "salters," are native New Englanders. Sea-run trout were once plentiful throughout the region, until dams, industrialization, pollution, declined flows in the rivers and over-fishing combined to decimate their numbers.

A dedicated group of local fishermen and other supporters hope to bring the fish back to local waters.

Sea-run trout spend part of their lives in saltwater, coming to freshwater to spawn. They are found on rivers that flow directly to the sea.

There are huge smiles, whoops and laughter as the stocking gets under way. There's a buzz of excitement and, yes, real joy, as folks tromp down the embankment or get in line to help out with the bucket brigade.

A grassroots project grows

Representatives of the Parker River Clean Water Association are on hand; president Marlene Schroeder beams as she steps into line to assist with the bucket hand-off. Local fishermen and a Trout Unlimited contingent also are there.

None are more proud than the staff, owners and customers of First Light Anglers.

The Rowley fly and tackle shop, which also runs charter boats out of Gloucester, spearheaded the initiative.

"The Mill River was a great sea-run brook trout river," said Patrick Brown of Georgetown, manager of First Light Anglers. "We wanted to see if we could get it going again."

In the past, the state Department of Fish and Game funded a sea-run trout program on the North Shore, but budget cuts forced the program's cancellation, according to the Northeast chapter of Trout Unlimited.

So the crew at First Light stepped in to organize and fundraise for a local stocking. Co-owners Derek Spingler of Hamilton and Nat Moody of Essex endorsed and supported the efforts, and Brown set about organizing. While he found the state supportive of the project in principle, he said, "It doesn't have the money to give us to do this."

So First Light put out a donation jar. Customers pitched in with singles and five-dollar bills, he said. "We literally raised a dollar at a time."

First Light also attracted the assistance of a corporate partner. Cell Signaling Technology, a Danvers-based life technology company, with a long-standing commitment to environmental causes, offered a matching donation. CST said if First Light could raise \$2,000, it would kick in \$2,700.

Dave Comb, creative director of CST, said the company was inspired to help because it's "an interesting idea that had a lot of potential." He said the re-establishment of the trout stock is an "amazing goal."

"We like to help out the community; this is a way that we can reach out and help a small effort that is a real grassroots project... I went down there that day to help restock the fish, and I was really impressed by the number of people who showed up. That shows you there is a pretty keen interest," Comb said.

Parker River Clean Water Association and other conservation groups donated to the cause as well.

It cost nearly \$5,000 to pull it off.

First Light plans to stock more fish in the fall, and again next year. The privately funded effort aims to restore the fish to their historic range. The ultimate goal is to rebuild the population here.

Comb hopes the stocking is successful, pointing out the various obstacles for the fish to overcome. But, a fisherman himself, he said hope runs through this effort, a way to "give back" to the local waterways.

"Fishermen and fishing is all about hope," he said. "That's what maintains a fisherman... It's about eternal hope. You're always waiting to see that you are going to get another fish."

Fish restoration

The stocking at the Mill River is the first step toward the goal of restoring sea run trout to the region.

Five hundred fish were released April 23. Volunteers put the fish into buckets and stocking pens, built by the folks at First Light. The contraptions resemble breathable coffins and allow the fish to be "float stocked" gently into the water.

The plan was to spread the fish out over 4 miles of the river. That way, they wouldn't be such easy pickings for birds, or anglers.

Volunteers took the fish into the saltwater, heading out into the marsh in canoes and kayaks and on foot with the stocking pens.

Organizers encourage anglers to practice catch and release because, while they understand the allure of catching these fish, the idea is to rebuild the population.

"We want them to grow, get big, have more. Our goal is to have a self-sustaining wild fishery," said Brown.

On the day the fish were to be liberated, the staff of First Light bustled around getting ready at the shop on Main Street in Rowley.

Pete Yukins of Manchester worked on crafting the homemade stocking pens.

Customer and fisherman Nunzio Zappala of Magnolia arrived and offered his insight into the pen design. He said he was a big supporter of the project and encouraged other customers to donate.

"All of us bought into the philosophy and efforts ... what they are trying to accomplish," he said.

Co-owner Spingler greeted customers and volunteers as they filtered in.

The pace of work on the stocking pens intensified. More tools came out. The intricate details of construction were debated and discussed.

And Brown's chocolate Lab gazed at the scene with a serene look on her face.

The stocking pens were loaded up while vehicles with canoes secured stood ready in the parking lot.

Before long, there was a sizeable crowd of volunteers gathered there, waiting for the fish to arrive. The downpour that greeted them didn't dampen anyone's spirits.

Organizers hope to eventually be able to measure the project's success and show that the fish are "holding over," said Spingler. That could bring funding in the future.

Team effort

Local organizers and volunteers look to emulate successful efforts on the South Shore.

There, on the Red Brook and Quashnet River, various local partners have sought to reestablish that population. The sea-run brook trout are back on the South Shore.

Organizers here have been pleased to find wide-ranging support locally.

"Everyone has been fully on board," said Brown. "If they're spawning, it's a great indicator of the watershed."

The trout were original inhabitants of the local watersheds, too, he points out, so their return can be a part of restoring the local ecosystem.

Volunteers and organizers were "really psyched" to see the efforts come to fruition, he said.

Kevin Correa of Georgetown is the Trout Unlimited Nor'East chapter president and he, too, was psyched April 23. Trout Unlimited, a national conservation organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of coldwater fisheries, provided many of the eager volunteers and helped to get the word out.

Correa said what organizers hope is the ultimate success of the project will be a powerful testament to the restoration of habitat and the overall health of the watershed. The project is exciting because it raises awareness of a whole range of conservation issues and provides an opportunity to educate communities about the importance of healthy rivers, Correa said.

He cites the successful efforts at the Cape as an inspiration. "Everyone said you'd never be able to restore that fishery."

The excitement is evident over at the Mill River as the fish are brought into the marsh. A passer-by pulls over, asks, "What are you stocking?" He talks about how his father used to fish here; he smiles.

In a blink, it's over. The canoes head further out into the marsh, fading away into the distance, their precious cargo safely in tow.

An osprey calls from a nearby tree.

How to get involved:

First Light Anglers would like the stocking to continue in future years, but fundraising netted just enough money to do the project this year. Contact the store to donate to ongoing efforts: 21 Main St., Rowley, MA 01969, 978-948-7004 or info@firstlightanglers.com

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