



Fishing for Tourists: Going Green(back)

The Question: How did the development of tourism in Colorado influence the cultural and biological processes reflected in today's distribution of trout?

In the 1860s, local and regional boosters, including railroad companies, advertised and promised great trout fishing along the Front Range of Colorado and in the Rocky Mountains. Within 15 years, the advertising campaign showed signs of success as evermore fishermen plied Colorado waters. After Congress established Rocky Mountain National Park in 1915, park officials also wanted to catch their share of anglers and assure they would leave the park with full creeks. As more people traveled to Colorado to fish, concern over diminishing angler success grew, prompting many to look for solutions. A range of organizations and agencies embraced fish culture, the raising of trout in hatcheries and intensive stocking of prized, though non-native, trout in park waters.

The Project: Analyze the environmental history of fishing in the park to learn what led to present fishing policy and trout distribution.

Environmental history is the interaction of humans and the environment over time. In his doctoral dissertation for the University of Kansas, Jerri Frank analyzed the history of fishing and fisheries management in the park, tracing its development from the initial emphasis on exploiting the "great and easy" fishing to attract tourists to the present efforts to restore native fish populations to their original waters. Through primary sources such as Superintendent's Reports, newspapers, and other official correspondence, Dr. Frank traced the evolution of park fisheries management.

The Results: Initial efforts at satisfying public demand for good fishing resulted in an unintentional path that eventually conflicted with evolving National Park Service policy.

The park managers' initial response to the demand for good fishing was to look for a technical solution, one responding to social, political, and economic interests. They embraced "science" in the form of fish hatcheries and stocking: increasing supply to meet ever-growing demand. Managers at that time were not concerned about stocking non-native species or what the impact might be on native trout populations and the environment. In the early 1930s, the park stocking policy came under review. The science of ecology was gaining prominence, and it did not take long for biologists to decide, based on this changing value system, that indiscriminately stocking non-natives was wrong because native fish species were being lost. By 1936, the park essentially stopped stocking non-natives and instead began stocking only cutthroat trout. But these were Yellowstone cutthroats, not greenback cutthroats, the true native species in park drainages. With the discovery of isolated pure greenback populations in the early 1950s, efforts to grow and establish reproducing populations in park waters began. The Estes Park hatchery stopped supplying on-native fish to the park in 1968, and it closed in 1983. Late 20th century fisheries management emphasized closing selected waters to fishing, eliminating unwanted trout species in certain waters, and adopting catch-and-release regulations.

The decline and degradation of fisheries in the park demonstrates how the tourism industry can greatly alter park landscapes. As scientists recognized how ecosystems functioned and ecology became more important in shaping park policy, the use of riparian spaces became more complicated. In fact, embracing fish culture as a solution led to significant environmental changes, including the near annihilation of the fish that drew anglers to the park.

This summary is based on published, peer-reviewed and/or unpublished reports available at the time of writing. It is not intended as a statement of park policy or as a definitive account of research results.

For more information on the park's research program, see www.nps.gov/romo

Written by: Bert Cushing Date: 07/15/2009 Photo credit: top, NPS-RMNP and bottom, Chris Kennedy, USFWS



In 1932, park rangers "plant" fish in Glacier Creek.



A native greenback cutthroat trout (courtesy Chris Kennedy, US Fish & Wildlife Service)