

STREAM WATCH

For a brief history of why this project came to be, the following excerpt details what observant anglers have been noticing...

Barry Mitchell (*From Barry Mitchell's 2002 Alberta Fishing Guide Magazine*)

"Since the major overhaul of the regulations in 1998, I've kept an eagle eye on our east-slopes trout waters. Some of my favorite streams were designated catch and release, and I've watched them closely for the past four years to determine if the regs have made a difference in the numbers and size of trout I'm catching. Happily, I've seen enough evidence during my fishing trips in the last two summers to convince me they have, and not just in C&R waters. The regs that increased minimum size limits on trout streams appear to be paying big dividends and my catch rates and the average size of trout I catch are up almost everywhere I fish.

That's the good news. The bad news can be summed up in one ugly word - poaching. I'm not talking about the generally accepted definition of poaching, like the illegal netting and selling of walleye, I'm talking about the poaching that occurs on every trout stream in Alberta by anglers who go fishing for the day or camping for the weekend and kill a trout or three under the legal size limit, fish with bait where it's banned, or keep a trout from a C&R stream.

These weekend poachers don't kill many trout, because they typically don't catch many - which may be how they justify their actions. The trouble with this small time poaching is that there are many thousand such poachers and collectively their impact can cause the collapse of a trout population in a relatively few years.

The mindset of the weekend poacher may be "Well, these are the only trout I've caught all day, and what harm can killing one or two illegal trout cause?" He's not far off the mark - killing just one or two undersized trout or taking the occasional one from a C&R stream won't do much damage in the long run.

But none of these thousands of small time poachers seem to consider how many others on the streams every weekend are doing the same thing. So it's no longer a matter of one guy and his family or a couple of buddies taking one or two fish each per weekend; it's now 20 or 50 or 100 such people every weekend taking one or two trout from an unproductive freestone stream that can't produce enough excess trout to keep up with the legal take, let alone the illegal one.

Every mountain and foothill stream I fished between Edson and the Crowsnest Pass last year had fair numbers of good sized trout in just about every corner pool or deep run - from opening day until about the middle of August. From then on, however, the only fish I seemed to be able to catch came from the more inaccessible pools that were too far from the road or the end of the nearest bush trail for the weekend warriors to bother walking into.

This kind of poaching degrades a fishery so slowly as to go almost unnoticed, except by those who fish a particular stream often enough to spot the trend. Worst of all, such poaching is all but unenforceable, since most of it happens out of sight of the roads - where, unfortunately, enforcement officers seldom venture.

Our conservation officers are so underfunded they claim to not have the time to spend an hour or two walking a creek bank or using a quad to access the more remote areas on summer long weekends to check for poaching. They spend what time they have patrolling main roads and campgrounds. In my opinion, this has very little effect, considering the evidence is usually only a foot or so long, easily hidden in a cooler and eaten shortly after being caught.

There is a solution to this problem: more frequent streamside, not roadside, patrols by enforcement officers. But this will happen only if those who care about the future of our trout fisheries make enough noise to force the issue with the government people responsible."