

Heroes of Conservation

These sportsmen couldn't just watch while pollution and misuse brought their home rivers to the brink of collapse. So they made it their business to bring them back.

By DAVE HURTEAU AUGUST 29, 2005

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Blackfoot River

The Fish: Westslope cutthroat, bull, rainbow, and brown trout

The Problem: Poor logging, grazing, and irrigation practices; mining runoff; overfishing

"One day, Daryl came into the store and said, 'I'm going to start a Trout Unlimited chapter. I'll be president and you'll be vice president,'" says Becky Garland, whose family owns Garland's Town and Country general store in Lincoln, Montana. "If you knew Daryl, [BRACKET "you'd know why"] I couldn't very well say no."

Below the storefront's 30-foot-wide mural of trout, elk, and deer, State Highway 200 winds to the floor of the Blackfoot Valley and meets one of America's most storied rivers. In the 1910s, when the writer Norman Maclean fished it, the Blackfoot River's broad pools and powerful runs produced creels full of enormous bull trout and pristine native Westslope cutthroats. By the time Maclean penned the last sentence of *A River Runs Through It* in 1973, the fishery was in serious decline. And by the day that Daryl Parker walked into Becky Garland's store in 1987, a lethal combination of mining runoff, overfishing, drought, and years of poor logging, grazing, and irrigation practices on the river's headwater tributaries had brought the Blackfoot to desperate straits.

"Several friends had been talking about the problems on the Blackfoot," Parker says. "We all wanted to do something."

They did. Sitting around the dining room table at the Parkers' ranch house outside of Lincoln, a group of sportsmen and citizens including Becky Garland, fishing guide Paul Roos, rancher Land Lindberg, logger Mark Gerlach, and Daryl and Sherrie Parker held the first meeting of what is now the Big Blackfoot Chapter of TU. The first step, says Garland, was to ask fisheries biologists to assess the river's problems. "They said they didn't have the funds. We said, 'What if we get you the funds?'"

In a month, the BBCTU raised \$15,000 in private donations, and state fisheries biologists Don Peters and Ron Pierce began an exhaustive survey of the Blackfoot's tributaries—the river's lifeblood, where the native trout are born, reared, and migrate up to 60 miles from the main stem each year to spawn in ribbons of water often no more than a step across. Covering hundreds of miles of private land on foot, Peters and Pierce recorded culverts and irrigation dams that blocked migrating trout, channels that diverted them, and banks that had been churned into mud pits by

cattle hooves. But repairing the damage meant getting the cooperation of the landowners.

Door-to-door, the volunteers, Peters, and Pierce spoke to ranchers. "It was difficult at first," says Garland. "We started with just a few landowners willing to take a chance. But once they saw the improvements we made, at our cost, they really became part of the team."

The recovery effort's reach was expanding in myriad directions. Chapter members sat down with Gary Sullivan of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who brought in critically needed federal funds. They met with mine owners and legislators to begin cleaning up toxic runoff bleeding into the watershed. They worked with timber companies and the Bureau of Land Management to improve logging practices. They motivated voters to block the proposal of a new cyanide heap-leach gold mine. All told, they reached out to a community with diverse—some thought incompatible—interests and began a groundbreaking cooperative effort now widely considered a model for future restorations.

Today, more than 100 citizens work with 27 state, federal, and nongovernmental groups and businesses in a broad coalition called the Blackfoot Challenge (of which the BBCTU is a partner), which to date has raised and spent more than \$5 million to restore and protect the watershed.

"The fishery has really responded," says Bruce Farling, director of Montana TU. "There are more native trout and better fishing in general than I've seen in 30 years." Even though the Blackfoot's restoration is a work in progress, it's already a success story.

"The best thing you can take away from the Blackfoot is motivation," says Farling. "We did it here, and you can do it in your own backyard."

[NEXT "Potomac River"] **Potomac River**

The Fish: Smallmouth, largemouth, and striped bass; walleyes, muskellunge, rainbow trout

The Problem: Municipal and industrial waste, acid-mine and agricultural runoff

"The fact that I run a guide service on the North Branch of the Potomac River is astonishing," says retired Maryland Department of Natural Resources biologist Ken Pavol, who 20 years ago declared much of the North Branch dead for the foreseeable future.

In fact, the recent history of the entire 380-mile Potomac River is full of surprises. From the trickling spring at West Virginia's famed Fairfax Stone to the broad current that reflects our capital's monuments on its way to Chesapeake Bay, the Potomac is not so much a comeback story as it is a story of remarkable comebacks.

Upon seeing the river in 1608, Capt. John Smith raved, "Neither better fish, more plenty, nor more variety...had any of us ever seen in a place." Some 350 years later, with hundreds of millions of gallons of raw and partially treated sewage being pumped daily into the Potomac's metropolitan D.C. stretch alone, President Lyndon Johnson declared the "Nation's River" a "national disgrace."

In response to the 1965 Water Quality Act, and later the Clean Water Act, federal and local authorities poured more than \$1 billion into modernizing the Blue Plains Wastewater Treatment Plant in D.C. Finally, in 1975, a Washington-area angler made a landmark catch: "It was the first recorded largemouth bass in D.C. waters in over 30 years," says Jim Cummins, an aquatic biologist and director of living resources for the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin. It signaled the start of a healthy fishery, and in 1989 the Potomac hosted its first national BASS tournament.

On the middle Potomac and South Branch, meanwhile, improvements in both wastewater treatment and non-point pollution levels bolstered the reputation of an already notable smallmouth fishery in those areas. But until the early 1980s, the North Branch remained forgotten, poisoned by acid-mine runoff and a gout of industrial waste from the Westvaco Corp. paper mill. The Washington Post called the stretch a "fetid mix of orange, black, and blue."

Changes began with the 1982 construction of the Jennings-Randolph Dam. The resulting lake collected much of the acid runoff and allowed for coldwater releases of only the best quality and, in turn, a put-and-take trout fishery.

"It was a limited fishery, but it sparked something," says Pavol. "Before then, there was near total apathy about the North Branch. But when people saw the improvements upstream of Westvaco, they wanted changes downstream."

More than 100 citizens and anglers attended Westvaco's 1990 relicensing hearing, and the company subsequently spent some \$15 million to clean up its effluent. Three years later, the MDNR stocked smallmouth bass. The Bureau of Mines implemented technology called lime dosing, which, says Pavol, "reduces acid like a giant Roloids tablet." In 2000, Westvaco reduced its solids by another 50 percent.

"The result has been an utterly transformed river," says Pavol. "Last year, fishing downstream of the effluent, a friend and I hooked up at the same time. I reeled in a 15-inch largemouth, and he landed a 15-inch rainbow."

Today, as the upper North Branch gains a reputation as one of the top Eastern trout waters, the lower North Branch, South Branch, and middle Potomac are renowned smallmouth destinations, with the middle river recently gaining notable walleye and muskie fisheries. The tidal Potomac from D.C. to Port Tobacco is ranked among the top five largemouth fisheries in the United States.

"I'm really excited about the future," says Cummins. "There are stories of the Potomac once being literally packed with fish from bank to bank. Some people think these are exaggerations. I don't. And I believe we could see that again."

[NEXT "Detroit River"] **Detroit River**

The Fish: Walleyes, sturgeon, smallmouth bass, yellow perch

The Problem: Industrial and municipal waste

At the edge of the Motor City, 31 of the Detroit River's 32 miles are walled in concrete and steel. Then there's Humbug Marsh, the last, lone stretch of undeveloped shoreline before the river drains into western Lake Erie. And it was about to become a golf-course community. All that stood in the way was a permit hearing-and more than 2,000 Detroit citizens who packed the Carlson High School auditorium on an autumn night in 1998 to attend. "It was a catalytic event," says John Hartig, manager of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. "Those people not only saved the marsh; they embodied a new attitude that is utterly changing the face of the Detroit River."

In the mid-1960s, when Life magazine declared Lake Erie dead, due in part to a constant flood of phosphorus pouring from the Detroit River, this 24-mile-wide strait, which marks the U.S.-Canada border, was a gutter of industrial waste and sewage. "It ran a different color every day," says Gary Towns of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. "Red, yellow, green-depending on which pipes were spewing the sludge du jour."

But in the decade following the 1972 Clean Water Act and Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement between the United States and Canada, tough restrictions on point-source pollution brought one of the most astounding water-quality recoveries in our history. "Everything came together on both the river and the lake," says Towns. "By the mid-1980s, the walleye fishing was tremendous-perhaps the best in the world." Moreover, Detroit citizens, aware that their taxes paid for the river's cleanup, espoused a new sense of ownership.

Citizens' groups soon cropped up, perhaps none more influential than the Friends of the Detroit River, which coordinated a public relations campaign to save Humbug Marsh. "The turnout at that 1998 permit hearing is a great example of what's possible when local sportsmen, other citizens, and conservation groups work together at the grassroots level," says Robert Burns, Detroit Riverkeeper and member of the Friends of the Detroit River.

Shortly after that hearing, environmental leaders from the United States and Canada met to decide what they wanted for the lower Detroit. The result was legislation that President Bush signed ining notable walleye and muskie fisheries. The tidal Potomac from D.C. to Port Tobacco is ranked among the top five largemouth fisheries in the United States.

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