

3 threats to fishing

Public access to fisheries is under assault, but that's not the only threat to sportfishing. Here's how you can help

WASHINGTON – Threats to fishing change and evolve over time.

Through the 1980s, anglers mostly worried about and worked to stop pollution. Although occasionally slow moving and ineffective, the federal government proved a valuable ally, providing an arsenal of weapons that included the Clean Water Act and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Oh, how times have changed.

Today, as America's fisheries become cleaner, the right to access those waters becomes increasingly more elusive.

And the same government that helped improve the environment now is considering recommendations that could declare broad sections of public waters off-limits to recreational fishing.

"We had no idea this was coming," said Chris Horton, BASS national conservation director. "Every angler needs to be aware of what's going on because it's coming to his backyard, if not tomorrow, then eventually."

Phil Morlock, director of envi-

ronmental affairs for Shimano, added, "What we're seeing coming at us is an attempted dismantling of the science-based fish and wildlife management model that has served us so well. If some of these groups have their way, the public is going to be pushed out of being able to recreate in order to satisfy a fundraising agenda."

In a word, access is threatened, and the threat is embodied in the federal Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force (IOPTF) created by President Barack Obama.

But it is not the only danger to fishing in the early 21st century.

"Pollution is still out there and still a problem," Horton said. "Conditions have improved, but pollution still is an issue."

Also, as federal agencies have failed to act decisively to contain the invasion, exotic species have rocketed to prominence as a catalyst for catastrophe.

"We like to slap a Band-Aid on and try to contain their spread," said the conservation director. "And we have failed miserably. So far, it

has been a fruitless effort."

What follows is a brief look at each of these threats to the future of fishing.

Access

The threat to public access took on substance during the 1990s, as lake-front property owners began to insist — often mistakenly — that they owned the water in front of their land and thus anglers who fished there were trespassing. Then some marina owners joined in on Corps-managed impoundments, trying to deny fishermen access to marina basins. Lake associations piled on, citing the danger posed by invasive species as the reason to close public ramps.

But all this pales in comparison to Obama's creation last June of the IOPTF, staffed with "high-level" government officials. In the months since, it has created two documents

and recommended an immense bureaucracy for the zoning of uses in our oceans, coastal waters and Great Lakes.

Angling activists agree that our waters should be better protected from pollution, habitat destruction and commercial overfishing. But they are fearful that preservationists within the environmental commu-

nity, along with their allies in the administration, will use this strategy as a means to close recreational fisheries for philosophical rather than scientific reasons, ignoring the fact that sport anglers are among the nation's most ardent conservationists.

At the state level, this is already happening in California with implementation of the Marine Life Protection Act.

And bass anglers should take special note that their fisheries also are at risk, despite what appears to be a focus on salt water. A "framework document" from the task force states:

"The geographic scope would include inland bays and estuaries in both coastal and Great Lakes settings. Inclusion of inland bays and estuaries is essential because of the significant ecological, social and economic linkages between these areas with offshore areas."

Then it added: "Additional inland areas may be included in the planning area as the regional planning bodies ... deem appropriate. Regardless, consideration of inland activities would be necessary to account for the significant interaction between upstream activities and ocean, coastal and Great Lakes uses and ecosystem health. ..."

Environmental groups have been pressuring Obama to bypass Congressional oversight and issue an executive order that would legitimize the task force's recommendations and create a National Oceans Council to zone how our waters will be used — or not used.

While no one in this constituency has said anything, at least publicly, about banning recre-



The restriction of fishing areas is one of the greatest threats to the sport today. Photo by Fotolia/JAC



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An increase in the number of algal blooms could be a sign of more toxins entering the waters. Photo courtesy of USFWS

ational fishing in U.S. waters, members are at best indifferent to its importance socially and economically, as well as its contributions to conservation. Instead, many view people as trespassers in nature, instead of part of nature. They want pristine preservation instead of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

In April, a report on ESPNOutdoors.com outlining the potential closure of recreational fishing waters went “viral,” prompting task force members to deny they had any intention of banning recreational fishing. The group’s final report — then only a week or two away from publication — still had not been issued as of this writing.

Harmful algae

As the access issue has coalesced into a threat of national scale, our failure to fully contain pollution has led to the virulent growth of a danger that few could have predicted in the 1980s and ’90s. Feeding on nitrogen and phosphorus from that pollution, Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) are strengthening, spreading and killing fish along the way.

Last fall, thousands of fish died in Dunkard Creek, a waterway that meanders along the Pennsylvania/West Virginia border. Officials say

they believe that golden alga was to blame, and they have warned that at least 18 other streams in West Virginia are at risk.

Until the Dunkard Creek incident, this lethal alga posed a threat mostly in the Southwest, thriving in waters with high salinity. Some say that pollution from coalbed-methane drilling contributed to the lethal bloom, but why did golden alga suddenly appear on the East Coast?

And why is lyngbya, previously a problem in the Southeast, now thriving in Lake Erie, where it smothers the bottom and piles up along the shore in stinking masses?

Why is didymo carpeting more and more streams, and why are blue-green blooms on the increase in the Great Lakes and other waters of the Upper Midwest?

“These blooms are occurring for longer times and in more places,” said Dr. Ken Hudnell, one of the nation’s foremost experts on HABs and a research professor in the Institute for the Environment at the University of North Carolina. “It could reach a point where the trend will be difficult to reverse.”

“We could lose entire ecosystems, and all that will be left are cesspools of cyanobacteria. We could lose species and have water that can’t be used for recreation or drinking.”

Exotic species

Likewise, when zebra mussels first were confirmed in the Great Lakes two decades ago, we had little idea what threats to fisheries would be posed by exotic species in 2010.

Now, zebras and their cousins, quagga mussels, have crossed the Continental Divide, with state and federal agencies battling determinedly to contain them in a few infested waters. Based on past experience, that effort likely will fail.

Of just as great concern, big-head and silver carp are about to enter Lake Michigan — if they haven’t already. Researchers have found DNA evidence suggesting that they have moved past the million-dollar electric barrier intended to keep them out.

“It’s a disaster,” said Dan Thomas, president of the Great Lakes Sport Fishing Council. “Heads should roll for this.”

That’s because resource managers fear the large-growing and prolific carp will decimate the billion-dollar sportfishery in the Great Lakes. Already the invaders dominate many of the nation’s rivers.

And as anglers wait for the other shoe to drop in Lake Michigan, they also wait to see how invasive snakeheads will impact sportfisheries in the Potomac and Delaware rivers, as well as eastern Arkansas.

At the latter, resource managers

used 16,000 pounds of powdered Rotenone and 3,000 gallons of liquid Rotenone across 50,000 acres and 400 miles and ditches and creeks in an attempt to eliminate the invader. They picked up at least 700 bodies afterward. Several snakeheads have been caught since, indicating that the population might have been knocked back, but it was not eliminated.

Mussels, carp and snakeheads are only the most obvious invaders that

threaten our fisheries. Gobies, spiny water fleas and many more now swim in our waters.

What next?

Although not as pressing as those three, other threats to fishing exist and must be monitored.

A long-term decline in fishing participation, if it continues unabated, could lead to the marginalization of anglers and radical restrictions on access and fishing rights. That would embolden a resilient antifishing movement that has become very influential in parts of Europe.

User conflicts are much more prevalent in saltwater than freshwater these days, but their divisiveness remains a threat to the sport overall.

Despite these threats, plenty of evidence exists that bass fishing is actually getting better in many freshwater fisheries. Many see that as proof that, while aquatic resources can be extremely fragile, nature can be powerfully resilient as well.

Wise, science-based resource management, along with an engaged public, helps too.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY



Zebra mussel infestations throughout the United States are evidence that invaders are difficult to control once they enter the borders.

Photo courtesy of Whitney Cranshaw/Colorado State University, Bugwood.org

What you can do to help

What can anglers do to fight these threats to fishing?

Plenty.

To learn more about access issues and to inform your elected representatives and federal officials about your stand, visit the Keep America Fishing website, www.keeperamerica.org.

“The only way to defeat this movement is to speak up,” said Chris Horton, BASS national conservation director. “We have one of the largest voting blocs in the country. But it can’t be just one voice; it has to be collective. Now is not the time to sit idly by.”

To combat HABs, encourage your federal representatives and senators to support the Freshwater Harmful Algal Bloom Research & Control Act of 2010 (www.freshwaterhablegislation.com). Hudnell said the legislation is needed because traditional methods of watershed management haven’t been effective.

On the exotic species front, sadly not much can be done regarding species already established. Possibly they can be

managed, but almost certainly they never will be eliminated.

Something can be done to stop future invasions, although thus far, the federal government has shown little will to do so.

“It would seem that Congress would recognize the need for serious legislation, to control ballast water discharges, for example,” said Phil Morlock, director of environmental affairs for Shimano. “But it’s not moving on this issue. What’s needed is a clear, comprehensive structure with legal enforcement behind it.”

Horton added, “If we had regulated fish farming, we would have kept carp out of the Great Lakes. But it has a strong lobby, as does the pet industry, which also has caused some of these problems.”

“We must quit sacrificing our natural resources for the benefit of a few.”

Plus, he added, more funding is needed for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to “combat the problem of new organisms.”

To learn more about stopping invasive species, visit www.anstaskforce.gov.

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