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Are cutthroat trout affecting catch numbers on the Truckee River?

Hunting & Fishing: Dave Rice

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An angler recently e-mailed me regarding his fishing success on the Truckee River. Since he first began fishing the Truckee in 1993, he says his personal success, or catch rate, over 20-30 angling trips a year has dropped from the five -fish limits he once took on a regular basis to one or two fish per trip.

He also thinks the fish he gets are much harder to catch, and wonders if the release of higher numbers of cutthroat trout into the Truckee has anything to do with the drop in his catch rate.

The questions are interesting because I also wondered if the cutthroat stocking program initiated in 2002 was affecting angler success, since the increase in cutthroat might have resulted in a reduction in the release of rainbow and brown trout.

For answers, I contacted Kim Tisdale, former Nevada Department of Wildlife Truckee River fisheries biologist who was recently promoted to the position of Western Region Fisheries Supervisor. Tisdale worked as a fisheries biologist in the Reno area for many years, and spent much of her time at the fishery on the Truckee River. I found her straightforward answers refreshing.

Each year, NDOW sends a voluntary questionnaire to about 10 percent of licensed anglers, and Tisdale examined those records dating back to 1993. She found that from 1993-2006, the most up-to-date information available, the catch rate during that period, has averaged between 1.5 and 2.5 fish per day per angler, according to the data.

"I did not see a huge drop in fishing success during those years. When we went into the huge drought during the years of 1992-94, the catch rate dropped, but people were still catching fish, and reported a little over one fish per day during that very dry period," Tisdale said.

From 1994-98, which were generally good water years, fishing success on the Truckee increased every year. Then the drought cycle returned and fishing success dropped once again. But overall, Tisdale hasn't seen a decline in catch on Truckee River since 1993.

Even more interesting is that over the past 10 years, fishing on the Truckee has been better than the decade of the 1980s when the Truckee had its highest number of angler days in one year -- 188,000 -- which occurred in 1987. From 2002-05, there were only 75,000 to 85,000 angler days reported by respondents to the questionnaire. Overall, anglers reported spending far fewer days fishing the Truckee than in the past. But, since 1993 they are actually having good to very good success.

Another way NDOW collects angler success information is through creel census checks along the

Truckee, which are conducted mainly during the summer by part-time university students studying wildlife management.

"Our creel data indicates that most people on the Truckee caught fish at a rate of about 1.5 (fish) per hour last year, which is a good catch rate," Tisdale said.

Creel data indicated the most commonly caught species of trout on the Truckee remains the rainbow trout, followed last year, by the cutthroat trout, and then the brown trout.

Since 2002, NDOW has released cutthroat trout as part of a study to see if a spawning population of this native trout species to the Truckee could once again be established. NDOW raises cutthroat at its Mason Valley Hatchery, near Yerington, for release into the Truckee, and also receives some of these species from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

About half of the fish released into the Truckee in recent years are rainbow that are sterilized so that they cannot crossbreed or hybridize with the cutthroat. The remaining 50 percent are Pilot Peak cutthroat trout thought to be direct descendants of Pyramid Lake cutthroat trout.

So has the release of cutthroat trout affected the angling catch rate on the Truckee? Yes, probably.

Last year, NDOW released 36,727 catchable size rainbow and nearly 38,000 catchable cutthroats. Although there were more than 1,000 more cutthroats released, anglers reported taking more than twice as many rainbows last year. So it follows that if rainbow trout were substituted for the same number of cutthroat, the angler catch rate undoubtedly would have been much higher. At least that's my opinion.

Most anglers would agree cutthroats are more difficult to catch than rainbow, at least in the river, which may be the leading reason fishermen annually take more rainbows than the native trout. Tisdale agrees that the cutthroat are harder to catch, but believes NDOW has a responsibility to attempt to establish cutthroat in the Truckee.

"Our mandate is to provide a sport fishery for the anglers, but we also have a responsibility to evaluate the fishery to see if we can replace a non-native with a native species and still provide a high level of angler success." she said.

Because there are so many variables that could affect an individual angler's success from one fishing trip to the next -- weather, time of day, time of the year, water temperature and level, type of bait or lure used, and number of hours fished -- it's impossible to determine the exact reason why we have good luck one day, and poor success another.

But it appears conditions on the Truckee, as well as the management of the fishery, make fishing this popular water a worthwhile adventure.

Dave Rice's fishing and hunting column appears every Wednesday. You can contact him at thomascreek@sbcglobal.net.