

WCO Diary

by WCO
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Opening Day

Quittapahilla Creek, Lebanon County

The opening day of trout season is right around the corner, and as you are preparing your fishing gear, waterways conservation officers (WCOs), their deputies and volunteers are hard at work stocking millions of trout in thousands of miles of waterways.

The first Saturday after April 11 traditionally ushers in the new trout season, and anglers greatly anticipate its arrival. Since you are reading this magazine, you are probably one of them! There is an excitement in the air in the hours before the first cast that is almost palpable.

In my district, scattered groups of anglers converge on area waterways the day before the season starts to set up camp and recreate into the early morning hours. The flicker of campfire flames pierces the night's darkness and dots the wood lines near popular streams in my Butler County district such as Connoquenessing, Thorn and Buffalo creeks. The aromas of food on the grill, imaginative incantations of the "fish that got away" and bellowing laughter drift from these camps on a cold, pre-dawn mist.

For the conservation officer, this momentous occasion is no time for sleep. I tell my deputies and other officials assisting with this annual event that it is our "bread-and-butter" season. At no other time will we have the opportunity to make as many contacts with local

anglers, and never are our fishing resources so important to protect as they are right now.

Our law enforcement efforts begin even before the first trout is stocked in March, and they increase as the opening day approaches. Sure, we do catch violators fishing before the 8 a.m. start, and we apprehend people damaging private property, littering and committing other violations, but that's just the half of it. The best parts of our work include the visits with anglers at their camps at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning! This is where the "rubber meets the road" in the WCO profession, and it is an ideal time to get valuable input from the people who matter the most to us at this time of year.

Inevitably, there is always one person at every camp who asks, "What are you doing here? It's only two in the morning! Don't you guys ever sleep?" These 2 a.m. visits have a lasting impression on anglers, and the word spreads around town quickly. For a WCO, omnipresence is a very important attribute that helps minimize the number of fishing violations. One just never knows where or when we might appear!

Trout anglers, please remember our legal and ethical responsibilities as outdoor enthusiasts. Poaching, littering and abuses of private property can cut deeply into our fishing opportunities. It is up to you to help your local Fish &

Boat Commission officers with policing our ranks and preserving our aquatic resources. Consider this short to-do list:

- Do treat private lands open to public fishing as if they were your own. Obtain permission from landowners far in advance if you desire to camp, build fires, cut firewood, and/or park in questionable locations on their property.

- Do offer a portion of your catch and your thanks to the landowner. Some landowners may not eat fish, but your offer of appreciation will certainly go a long way.

- Do pick up any litter you find, even if it isn't yours. A few extra pieces of paper or plastic in your pockets won't slow you down.

- Do report violations to your local WCO as quickly as possible, and be willing to testify as a witness. Take a stand against violators.

- Do read your free copy of the 2004 *Summary of Fishing Regulations & Laws* before you start out, and courteously remind others if they haven't read it. These books are available from fishing license issuing agents throughout the state and at Fish & Boat Commission regional law enforcement offices, or read the *Summary* online at the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us.

The 2004 trout season begins at 8 a.m., April 17. Enjoy your time afield, and best of luck to all of you! ☐