



Impacts of Fishing Line and Other Litter

by Deborah Weisberg

During cleanup of the North Branch of the Susquehanna River, a canoe barge was crafted and used to transport heavy debris out of a shallow water inlet.

photo-Melissa Rohm

Dave Miko has seen a lot of strange sights as Division of Fisheries Management chief for the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC).

But, few compare to the hourglass-shaped trout he has encountered on streams, where they have grown around plastic bottleneck rings that someone tossed into the water.

“I have seen it twice when I was electrofishing, so it probably happens even more,” said Miko. “I cut the rings and hoped for the best, but it’s sad and disturbing.”

More often, angler and boater carelessness takes other forms, as evidenced by bait cups, plastic water bottles and tangled fishing lines that blight stream banks and lake shores. It takes thousands of years for petroleum-based plastics to biodegrade; they can remain in fisheries forever.

And, while direct environmental impacts are devastating enough, litter can come back to haunt people, too, since it’s the number one reason landowners post property, according to PFBC Education Manager Carl Richardson. “Landowners tell us litter is the tipping point in deciding to cut off public access to streams.”

Since 2008, anglers have lost about one trout stocked stream section in Pennsylvania each year, bringing the total number of posted miles to an all-time high.

It has spurred some conservationists to try to avert more losses. According to trout guide George Daniel of TCO Fly Shop in State College, Trout Unlimited chapters in central Pennsylvania have stepped up landowner outreach efforts as fishing pressure mounts on Penn’s Creek, the Little Juniata River and other blue-ribbon streams.

On Lake Erie, the Pennsylvania Steelhead Association and other groups make litter pickups and goodwill gestures towards landowners a major part of their mission. With PFBC spending millions of dollars to acquire easements on Elk Creek, Walnut Creek and other popular fisheries, this kind of private-sector support helps lay the groundwork for future access purchases.

“Property owners complain about litter and lack of respect for their land,” said Steve Brugger, owner of Lake Erie Ultimate Angler and a past president of the Pennsylvania Steelhead Association. “It’s ironic, because we’re outdoorsmen and should be good stewards.”

Aside from helping fund the fruit baskets that Gem City Outdoorsmen distribute to more than 50 landowners at Christmas time each year, Brugger’s shop takes part in massive stream cleanups held annually just before steelhead season. “We each get a zone. Ours was the Walnut Creek



The SMART Angler Program is designed to provide instruction to youth between the ages of 8 and 12 on the types of fish found in Pennsylvania, fish habitats, safety, equipment, outdoor manners and protecting our water resources.

photo-Ted Walke

Access Area, which is always a dumping ground,” said Brugger. “The number one item is cigarette butts, but we also see a lot of plastic pop bottles, beer cans, old tires, even parts of cars.”

Similar cleanups are being held elsewhere across the state. Last summer, organizations, including Paddle Without Pollution, joined a two-day cleanup of the North Branch of the Susquehanna River, collecting tons of trash. Another North Branch of the Susquehanna River cleanup effort is being planned for the summer of 2013.

“Studies show that the most effective way to change people’s behavior is through peer pressure,” said Richardson. “If you’re with a group on opening day, and say, ‘Hey, pick up your coffee cup,’ that reduces littering, and the person may think twice about doing it again.”

“The PFBC’s SMART Angler Fishing Program encompasses littering and aims to reach kids, although today’s youths may be savvier than previous generations about protecting the environment,” said Richardson. “SMART stands for Safety, Manners, Appreciating clean waterways, Releasing some of your catch and Teaching others to be SMART anglers.”

“When we do family fishing programs, we talk about ‘pack it in and pack it out.’ Always take back what you came in with,” said Richardson.

Brugger agrees that anglers need to police each other. “We don’t suggest people get confrontational, especially with strangers, but if your buddy is littering, say something to him.”

Brugger takes a trash bag with him even on guiding trips, setting an example for his clients. One of the most dangerous kinds of debris is old fishing line. “We even find rafts of it in the parking lot at Walnut Creek Access Area.”

Because it is difficult to see, it can cause anglers to trip. If there are hooks attached, they can pierce the skin. Fishing line can snare turtles and birds and presents a particular danger at nesting time, according to Jim Martin, director of conservation for Pure Fishing, the company that produces Berkeley fishing line. “Birds use it to build nests, and as the hatchlings grow, they get caught up in it and die,” said Martin.

Pure Fishing partners with groups to recycle fishing line at its Spirit Lake, Wisconsin plant, where the fishing line is transformed into park benches and fish habitat structures.

Some groups are working to collect fishing line in Pennsylvania, including the Nanticoke Conservation Club of Luzerne County, which built line receptacles at Sylvan Lake, Lily Lake and Union Township Access on the Susquehanna River—all PFBC facilities—and at Frances Slocum State Park, last spring.

“Each one is a piece of 4-inch diameter PVC pipe, about 2 ½ feet tall, with a 90-degree elbow,” said Gary Gronkowski, club president. “We chose 4-inch pipe, because it’s too narrow for beer cans and it costs less than \$25.”

PPL Corporation installed similar devices around Lake Wallenpaupack, Pike County.

“Both entities have signed formal agreements with PFBC to regularly empty the receptacles, so they don’t overflow,”



Erin Pierce (left) and Bob Romananski piling up the debris removed from the North Branch of the Susquehanna River into one of many dumpsters.

photo-Diane Secor



photo-Diane Secor

Canoes were used to collect debris during cleanup efforts on the North Branch of the Susquehanna River.

said Walt Dietz, PFBC outreach and education coordinator in the northeast region. "Maintenance is the key. To date, the project is working well, and we're eager to engage more partners."

Richardson commends groups that want to be part of the solution, and said even individuals can make a profound difference.

He remembers how in his youth his father would grab a couple of garbage bags and head with him and his uncles to their favorite streams in Centre and Cambria counties. "My dad would watch people hog things up and not say a word, but we'd pick up after them," Richardson recalled. "We did it all the time."

It's common practice for anglers who regard a fishery as their "home water," Miko observed. "I watched a guy on Canonsburg Dam picking up litter one Monday morning when we were out there working. He told me he's out there with trash bags every Monday morning."

"It's a shame people have to clean up after others," said Miko. "But, we're grateful they are willing to do it." ☐



photo-courtesy of Nanticoke Conservation Club

Bob Katra, Nanticoke Conservation Club member, finishing the installation of a fishing line recycling bin at Union Township Access, Luzerne County.