

Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission Report

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Through the Eyes of a Child

Last weekend my grandson Alexander (aka Xander) and I were enjoying a nice summer day when I noticed a giant adult stonefly crawling across the driveway. Although I have been Director for a little over 2 years now, I still remember enough about aquatic entomology to, at a minimum, impress 4-year old Xander.

I caught the bug and we had a basic discussion about stream ecology. First I explained that the bug didn't bite and once he got accustomed to it crawling around on his hand and arm, he accepted it as sort of a pet, at least for the moment in time it was connected to him.

When my children were young we would catch these giant critters, slowly approach a pool on the small stream beside the house and feed the adult flies to the small native brookies that were always waiting



John's grandson Xander checking out a stonefly

for a free meal.

I thought about teaching Xander how to feed stoneflies to trout but he was having so much fun playing catch and release with Mr. Pteronarcys that I thought it could wait for another day. While I watched him study the stonefly with the curiosity of a 4 year old, I realized how simple life was at that age. He trusted me when I told him that the bug didn't bite, seemed to understand that the egg masses at the end of the abdomen were going to hatch into little stoneflies and he eventually released the adult back to the stream so that it could complete its life cycle.

Unfortunately Xander will grow up and become influenced by life's competing pressures. His decisions will become much harder to make and granddad won't always be around to advise about nature's assets. He will not be sure who he can trust, he will lose his childhood innocence to adult skepticism and most importantly he will eventually be on his own to make important decisions.

I am confident that when he grows up, he will seek out the necessary facts and when the time comes to make those critical decisions, he will do the right thing.

As you have probably read, I have been advocating that the middle reach of the Susquehanna River should be listed by our Department of Environmental Protection as an impaired water, which would then require an investigation to determine sources and causes of impairment and then a plan to fix the prob-

lem.

It doesn't seem like a complicated decision to me since our data show that the world-class smallmouth bass fishery has collapsed due to disease and is in danger of extinction. Sick fish mean a sick river. This condition is called ecological impairment.

The decline of the smallmouth bass population has led to a decline in fishing which is termed recreational use impairment. However, there are others in positions of authority in state government that disagree. It is my job to convince them that the river is in trouble and we need to act now before it is too late. I don't want to be the Director of the Fish and Boat Commission when the last bass is caught in the river!

The public response to our call for help has been impressive. However, I want to tell you about one person who has gone above and beyond expectations. Her name is Grace Lustig, an 8 year old from Biglerville. Grace has written an article in her local newspaper, published an opinion article in the Harrisburg Patriot and started an online petition to designate the river as impaired which has 418 signatures as of June 6th.

I believe that it may be time that we step back from the politics, the economics and the social issues and look at this issue through the eyes of a child. After all, Xander and Grace may be in the best position to advise us all about the real issues we face since they will be the ones most affected by the results of our decision.

You can sign the petition to Declare the Susquehanna River impaired under the Federal Clean Water Act at: <http://www.change.org/petitions/the-u-s-senate-declare-the-susquehanna-river-impaired-under-the-federal-clean-water-act>

Senate Game & Fisheries Committee Hears Testimony from PFBC Staff Regarding Problems with the Susquehanna River

The committee held an informational meeting with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission May 22nd, on the arguments as to why the Susquehanna River should be labeled an impaired river due to its effect on smallmouth bass.

G. Warren Elliott, Commissioner, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC), anecdotally noted the changes in fishing conditions on the Susquehanna River and stated that this Sunday he was unable to fish for smallmouth bass due to a PFBC imposed prohibition during spawning to help bring back the smallmouth bass population.

He further pointed out, “Studies have shown that there are fewer fish, that the young of the year are dying, that the fish are becoming genetically confused, with many males showing signs of developing the ability to lay eggs. The fish



Top Left: Small Mouth YOY Bass with sores
Top Right: Diseased Adult
Left: Blotchy Adult Bass

that we do catch often have sores on them and do not appear healthy.”

He stated the bass fishing on the river used to be world-renowned and a huge economic driver. Elliott asked the committee to “do what you can to have the river listed as impaired” despite nobody knowing exactly why the river has become this polluted.

Geoff Smith, PFBC Susquehanna River Biologist, gave an overview of factors affecting smallmouth bass. During his presentation, Smith noted the main issues relate to concerns over the decline of the smallmouth bass fishery brought on by disease in the young of the year due to water quality concerns stemming from nutrient-related issues and low dissolved oxygen and high pH, as well as endocrine disruption. He indicated that while the problem started around ten years ago, the “perfect storm” is occurring from stressful water quality, bacteria, viruses, and parasites which contribute to the decline of the smallmouth bass population.

Smith pointed out reasons for urgent action, indicating that since it takes longer for bass to grow to the legal limit due to the negative factors

mentioned, it will have a large economic impact on anglers no longer coming to Pennsylvania for smallmouth bass fishing on the Susquehanna.

Smith finally noted public outcry over the declining bass population and how the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has declined to grant impaired status to the river since it looks at different factors. He noted a new request is in to DEP and there are hopes the river will finally be declared impaired so more can be done to help bring back the bass population.

Sen. McIlhinney asked if DEP has failed to respond to PFBC’s request for impairment of the river. John Arway, Executive Director of PFBC, indicated that is the case and noted today was the last day for comment on the proposal and the suggestion of classifying the river as impaired was not included by the department. Sen. McIlhinney asked if a determination has not yet been made by the department. Smith stated this is correct.

Chairman Kasunic asked if a request has been made by PFBC to DEP a second time to have the river classified as impaired. Arway said there have been two requests, one made department-to-department



PFBC Executive Director John Arway, Biologist Geoff Smith and Commissioner G. Warren Elliott testify. Legislative Liaison Devin DiMario in background.

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Continued Page 31
www.pfsc.org 15

**Continued from Page 15:
Senate Hearing**

and the other done through the public comment period. He indicated Secretary of DEP Michael Krancer takes a different view of the indicators and whether the river should be classified as impaired.

Sen. McIlhinney stated Sec. Krancer needs to take time to look at all the information.

Arway commented that he has been with PFBC for a long time and has seen positive changes in water quality due to the efforts of DEP, which has put Pennsylvania as a leader in the fight for clean water. Despite this, Arway noted challenges still exist and the situation on the Susquehanna is one of them. He suggested the river is in trouble and sick fish mean a sick river.

Sen. Robbins expressed concern over wholesale worry regarding the river, noting the impact this had on Lake Erie that turned out to be false. He said a long look is needed at what is happening and not happening and why a decision has not been made by DEP to classify the river as impaired.

Chairman Alloway said nobody is rushing to judgment, but a long look is needed as to why this is happening in the river. He cautioned what is happening to the river goes back into human bodies when water is consumed. Arway agreed with

both Sen. Robbins and Chairman Alloway's points.

Sen. Boscola said she is skeptical when things are done or not done due to budgetary constraints and said she will send a letter to DEP about the impairment of the river.

Arway responded the first step in helping the river is acknowledging it is sick and indicated the river looks fine from the surface but the problem being below the water. He pointed to comments PFBC received from world class anglers, former DEP officials, and an eight year old girl who ran a petition calling for action on the river. He noted all have expressed concern and a desire for the river to be classified as impaired so as to bring back the smallmouth bass population. He then pointed out a letter PFBC sent to DEP regarding the classification of impairment for the Susquehanna.

Sen. Brewster asked how long the decline has been happening. Arway noted it began as far back as 2005 with the last successful spawn. Sen. Brewster asked why there has not been action from DEP, particularly noting the length of time and distance covered by the problem. Arway noted DEP looks at different indicators for impairment.

Sen. McIlhinney asked if DEP is saying the river is fine because the invertebrates are fine, despite being

presented with blotchy bass. He also asked if the fish are having trouble reproducing. Arway confirmed this is the case.

Elliott suggested impairment could mean additional federal funding for the river. Arway clarified noting it would merely require a reprioritization of existing federal funds.

Chairman Kasunic suggested DEP come in and talk to the committee and said more specificity is needed about what is happening and to know where the pollutants are coming from. Arway said it is difficult to find the source of the pollution since it is such a large system and noted the bulk of the repopulation problem is occurring in the west branch of the river. Chairman Kasunic asked if other types of fish are exhibiting problems. Arway noted other types are not watched closely. Elliott anecdotally opined the Rock Bass have entirely disappeared from parts of the river.

Chairman Alloway noted there is a cost balance to everything and said when it comes to water, a closer look is needed since water sustains life. He clarified the problem is not due to fracking and said the problem is important since fishing is of huge economic value. He noted the meeting is not meant to bash DEP and said the department is needed as partner in the solution.

Report by PA Legislative Services

Commonwealth Court: The Commonwealth Court listened to arguments June 6th regarding the state's new Marcellus Shale law. Municipal officials, an environmental group, and House Democrats seek to have portions of Act 13, the state law regulating unconventional natural gas, ruled unconstitutional. They believe the new law outlining where drilling sites and compressor stations can be located oversteps their bounds. Municipal officials are seeking to retain the ability to manage the industry themselves.

Sierra Club Considering Anti-Trapping Policy

Source: trapperpredatorcaller.com

The Sierra Club has long pretended to be an ally to hunters and trappers, but if they move forward with a proposed anti-trapping policy, they will have drawn a clear line in the sand that they are no friend to outdoorsmen.

If you believe in protecting, promoting, and preserving our outdoor heritage and 2nd Amendment Rights, then we need you as a member of the PFSC. Your membership will not only help us financially accomplish those goals, but will also help us send a strong message to our legislators with our numbers.