

Straight TALK

by **John A. Arway**

*Executive Director
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Opening Days

I believe that it is time for me to clear the waters, so-to-speak, about a topic that is particularly important to me and many other Pennsylvania anglers who enjoy traditions. I would hazard to guess that I am about as staunch an advocate for tradition as it gets. When it comes to opening days, I have always been a strong defender of the importance of their tradition. Whether it is trout or deer, bass or turkey, Pirates or Phillies, Steelers or Eagles, Penguins or Flyers, there is nothing more exciting than the anticipation of an opening day. Fortunately, unlike some other professional sports, our opening days are on Saturdays, so most of us can plan for them and arrange our schedules to participate in them. I do, however, remember being allowed to skip some days of school to attend some opening days at Forbes Field with my dad and uncle, but I believe that the statute of limitations has run out on those truanancies. I still have a tough time getting to sleep the night before any opening day since it marks a new beginning of an experience that I thoroughly enjoy. Although someone can fish somewhere in Pennsylvania 24 hours a day,



Executive Director John A. Arway thanks a successful angler at Little Buffalo State Park, Perry County.

365 days a year, opening days are extra special and are designed to be enjoyed with family and friends and to create memories that last a lifetime. They give us a chance to relive the memories that we had fishing with those close fishing buddies who may not be with us in person but are still looking at us in the reflection of the pool on our favorite Brook Trout stream.

Although we have many fishing openers in Pennsylvania, the one that commands the most attention has always been our trout opener. It is the harbinger of spring and provides an excuse for many of us to leave the house and cure ourselves of cabin fever. The trout opener is a family tradition that actually begins before the opening day by meeting one of our great white fleet at a local gathering place and entering a caravan of vehicles that follow the truck to deliver catchable trout to points along a local stream that has been stocked for generations. There is something special to some trout anglers and their families about following the truck to verify that the fish have been stocked in the right numbers and in the right places, so there are no excuses on opening day. The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) continues to stock 3.2 million trout averaging over 11 inches in length in over 23,854 miles of stocked trout streams and 131 stocked trout lakes. We also include almost 9,000 trophy golden rainbow trout in the mix since these continue to be one of the most popular catchable trout that anglers target. Over half of these trout are stocked pre-season, before opening day, and the rest are stocked over a period of time as in-season and fall stockings. Also, let's not forget about our 3,745 wild trout streams providing 12,909 miles of wild trout water that some anglers prefer to fish. They can disappear into the patches of mountain laurel along a native Brook Trout stream, or we can find them matching the hatch on our famous limestoneers. BTW—I personally like to fish both. Peak fishing license sales coincide with the start of the trout opener, and the funding generated through these sales is critical to PFBC's ability to fulfill our conservation and recreation mission. We have been receiving some criticism about our approach



On April 25, 2014, Congressman Glenn Thompson joined Executive Director John A. Arway for in-season stocking on Black Moshannon Creek, Centre County.



Executive Director John A. Arway, Pennsylvania Game Commissioner Jay Delaney and members of the Mehoopany Creek Watershed Association are shown on Mehoopany Creek (www.mehoopanycreek.org).

at creating more opportunities for people to fish. Honestly, it doesn't make much sense to me why someone would get upset with an "Approved Trout Waters Open to Year-Round Fishing" designation that allows both catch and release trout fishing and the harvest of other species of fish that are in season. The same holds true for the southeast regional opener being two weeks before the statewide opener or our Mentored Youth Trout Days.

The reality is that society is different today than it was 10, 20 or 50 years ago. We peaked in recruitment rate and license sales in 1990 when we sold 1.163 million fishing licenses, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's 1991 National Survey estimate of angler participation in Pennsylvania was 1.426 million anglers. In 2014, we sold 841,000 licenses with a 2011 national estimate of 1.1 million Pennsylvania anglers. Average number of days spent fishing in 1991 was 19 days. In 2011, it was nine days. Remarkably, we individually spend about the same today, \$409, as we did in 1991, \$475. The national survey estimates participation rates every five years and provides useful information about a variety of things. Most importantly, it allows us to measure the actual difference between annual license sales and participation, which is called the churn or attrition rate. For fishing, churn rate reflects the number of anglers who come and go from our sport over a specific period of time. In a business context for subscriber-based businesses like state fish and wildlife agencies, it is one of the primary factors that determines the steady-state level of customers a business like ours will support (Wikipedia). That is the number of people who want to fish, but don't buy a license every year. So, why are less people fishing (buying a license) today than in 1991 when we have approximately the same number of people who are potential participants (over 326,000 anglers)?

That is the question we need to answer since the future of fishing, not only in Pennsylvania, but also in the entire

country, depends upon it. Our current attempt at reaching anglers in the churn is to offer more opportunities for people to choose from and spend their leisure time (9 vs. 19 days) on fishing instead of watching television or going to the movies. That's right. Those are the activities that compete for our time. The more opening days, the more likely the weather will cooperate, the more likely we can set aside time to participate and the more likely we will fish. The idea of creating more opportunities also applies to kids. Our goal in creating more mentored youth opportunities is to provide an incentive for kids to take adults fishing, because adults are often too busy to think about it for ourselves.

Hope to see you on the water.

Your Director,
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The mission of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission is to protect, conserve and enhance the Commonwealth's aquatic resources and provide fishing and boating opportunities.

**Get questions answered.
Share your ideas.**

