

Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission Report

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Sesquicentennial (150th) Anniversary 1866 – 2015

On March 30th 2016, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission will commemorate and celebrate the 150th anniversary of our founding in 1866.

A convention was held in Harrisburg in 1866 to investigate water pollution being caused by the wholesale logging of Pennsylvania's forests and the impacts caused by sedimentation of our mountain lakes and streams. There were also serious concerns about the reduction of American shad runs in the Susquehanna River.

This discussion resulted in Governor Andrew Curtin signing the law, Act of March 30, 1866 (P.L. 370, No. 336) that named James Worrall Pennsylvania's first Commissioner of Fisheries.

In 1925, Act 1925-263 established the Board of Fish Commissioners and then in 1949 Act 1949-180 officially established the Pennsylvania Fish Commission as an agency and described its powers and duties.

In 1949, the Commission appointed Charles A. French as its first executive director, and in 1991 under Act 1991-39, the Pennsylvania Fish Commission became the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

Over the last 150 years, the Commission has evolved from a one man

operation funded solely by the general fund to an agency with a complement of 432 staff funded by anglers and boaters through license and registration fees and the federal excise taxes on fishing and boating equipment. Our mission has broadened a bit from our original one but we are still focused on protecting, conserving and enhancing our aquatic resources and providing fishing and boating opportunities.

Over the course of the next year, I hope that you, my fellow anglers and boaters, will join in our commemoration of the last 150 years. It will be a great time to learn about our agency's contribution to the health of Penn's Woods and Waters and celebrate the fact that our 86,000 miles of streams, nearly 4,000 lakes and reservoirs, over 404,000 acres of wetlands and 63 miles of Lake Erie shoreline are still home to more than 25,000 species of known plants and animals, and perhaps many thousands more yet to be identified.

These facts demonstrate the enormity and complexity of the challenges that face the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission as we strive to fulfill our legislative and Constitutional duties to protect, conserve and enhance our Commonwealth's aquatic resources.

Pennsylvania Constitution

Article 1, Section 27. Natural resources and the public estate.

The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people.

(May 18, 1971, P.L. 769, J.R.3)



Over 150 species of plants and animals have been lost from Pennsylvania and 664 others are species of greatest conservation need and are detailed in our State Wildlife Action Plan -- 90 birds, 19 mammals, 65 fish, 22 reptiles, 18 amphibians and 450 invertebrates.

The major threats have been identified as residential and commercial development (15%), energy production and mining (13%), pollution (13%), invasive and other problematic species, and genes and diseases (12%).

We have 12,763,536 people and increasing on a fixed amount of land, 45,333 square miles.

As of 2015, 83,438 miles of streams and rivers, out of a total of 86,000 miles, have been assessed by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection staff for aquatic life use support and approximately 19% (15,882 miles) do not fully support healthy aquatic communities.



Furthermore, some of these waters are still not fishable or swimmable. We have the nation's 16th largest river, the Susquehanna River, which drains nearly half of the Commonwealth's land area and has been identified as a major contributor to the impairment of the Chesapeake Bay.

The Susquehanna currently supports a smallmouth bass fishery in distress with bacteria infecting young bass producing mortality rates of 10 to 70% (2005 – 2015). Adult bass have been found with cancerous tumors, other open sores and lesions, intersex conditions (male bass with egg precursors and hormones which should only be found in female bass), and black spots that aren't understood (blotchy bass syndrome or melanosis).

There is something wrong with the Susquehanna River and we need to admit it and begin working on a plan to fix the problems.

We also know that 15,882 miles of our streams and rivers and 37,761 acres of our lakes are not attaining their aquatic life uses because of the current and legacy impacts from agriculture and coal mining creating siltation, metals, nutrients and organic enrichment of our waters.

Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) recognized the importance of a land ethic in his writings and teachings; however, our society is still trying to balance the importance of a strong economy with the value of a healthy environment.

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.”

— Aldo Leopold ((1887–1948)



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Our future is bright but not without challenge.

We have made substantial progress over the last generation by cleaning up our waters so that we can now say that we have more waters to fish today than when we were children. However, yesterday's challenges were simple compared to the environmental and natural resource challenges that we face in the future.

Today's challenges include cancerous tumors, bacterial infections, blackspots and intersex smallmouth bass in the mighty Susquehanna; rapidly expanding deep natural gas development across the Commonwealth and the uncertainties about fracking; the brook trout, our state fish, being compromised by changing climate; invasive species out competing native species; our lakes, rivers and the Chesapeake Bay clogged with nuisance algae blooms that lower oxygen to dangerous levels for fish and other aquatic life; and, less people, including our legislators, fishing, boating and recreating outdoors...and we can't forget about our obligation to restore American shad to the mighty Susquehanna!

Unfortunately, I can't promise you the same thing that Executive Director Bielo promised anglers in his "Turn of a Century" article in 1966. He was able to promise doubling the acreage of fishable lake waters from 57,000 acres in 1966 to 111,000 acres in 1975 because of a Commonwealth commitment to fund and build new lakes.

Today we have a similar funding commitment, but it is to repair and maintain those same historic dams which have since become unsafe and high-hazard. This commitment will insure that our children and grandchildren will continue to have a place to fish in Pennsylvania.



Our new challenges will no longer be at the local scale but will require much different solutions at the watershed, regional, national and even global scales. We will have to work across disciplines and use the appropriate science to diagnose the problems, apply the engineering skills to develop the solutions and have the political will to create the laws and provide the funding for the solutions.

It won't be easy, but I am confident that our next generation will have the knowledge, skills, abilities and the guts to get it done right. Perhaps we will finally come to recognize that a healthy economy and a healthy environment must co-exist and the adoption of a land ethic will no longer be optional as Leopold professed.



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