A NATIONAL PARK SERVICE FISH POLICY

David H. Madsen, Supervisor of Fish Resources,
National Park Service.

During twenty-five years of close association with the problems of wildlife preservation in many parts of the United States, I have found no example of such a complete lack of planning for the future as the fish planting and distribution policies of both the Federal Government and the States. It is my observation that more than 95 percent of all the important fish-producing waters of the United States have been permanently injured by the promiscuous introduction of non-native and, in many cases, incompatible species of fish.

It is not my intention to criticise any Government Bureau or State Game Commission. The whole practice has been so bad generally that no one who has been long associated with it can be held blameless. There has never been sufficient knowledge of the life history of the native fish in American waters to provide the necessary information for a perfect, or even fairly sound, long-time program of distribution. There has been sufficient information, had it been properly applied, to have produced much better results from every standpoint than those which we now observe. The great tragedy is that almost all waters where undesirable species of fish have been introduced are permanently damaged. Whenever any of the more prolific species of fish are introduced into a large body of water where the environment is favorable, it is impossible to eradicate them completely.

In reviewing the history of the National Park Service, we are confronted with the fact that our policy with reference to fish and fishing has, until recently, been entirely inconsistent with our policy gegarding every other

form of wildlife in the national parks. If we had followed the same policy with reference to other wild animals in the national parks that we have followed with our fish-stocking program, we would probably have the red deer of Europe intermingling with the mule deer of the Kaibab; we would have mountain goats in the Tetons, Chinese pheasants in Yosemite and so on. Conditions similar to these have actually taken place in our fish-planting program. We probably have no less than 20 or 30 non-native species of fish permanently established in national park waters. There is not a national park where fishing is important that has not been subjected, in a greater or lesser degree, to this violation of national park policies.

This trend of our fish planting policies in public waters was not planned. As civilization moved westward in America, every pioneer who, as a boy had caught cat fish, bass or blue gill, pike, perch or any other fish, carried with him those memories and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he succeeded in one way or another in bringing westward the particular species of fish in which he had been interested as a boy. These fish were planted wherever it was most convenient. That statement just about describes the fish-planting policy of the United States for a long period of time. Nor were we satisfied merely with transplanting fish from one part of the United States to another. We even went to Europe and brought across the European brown trout, and worst of all our mistakes in the distribution of fish — the carp.

In traveling over the United States, I have been astonished to find carp

present in almost every water where this fish will survive. Recently we have undertaken a program costing many millions of dollars in an effort to acquire and to recreate extensive marsh areas for the purpose of saving the ever-diminishing number of waterfowl. The expenditure of this money, or at least a great portion of it, would never have been necessary if carp had not been generally introduced. Nor will the problem ever be completely solved because these fish will find their way into ~~almost~~ all of the wildfowl marshes of the country and continue in the future as in the past to be a menace to the preservation of migratory waterfowl. Carp are injurious to the habitats of waterfowl and desirable game fishes because of their habit of destroying vegetation and continually riling the waters during feeding.

~~Just why we should have~~ Since we have encouraged fishingin the national parks and the resultant program of fish hatcheries and fish planting in order to maintain good fishing, ~~when we prohibit hunting of all kinds, is not easy to understand. But since this is now, and forever perhaps, will be the exception in our national park policy,~~ it does seem our definite duty to predicate that policy upon the theory that we will, insofar as possible, protect the native species of fish in the national parks. With this definite purpose in mind, we have developed, and there has been approved by the Director, a definite fish-planting policy. This policy has for its purpose the protection for all time of such national park waters, as are not already contaminated, against the introduction of non-native species. As a result of this policy, it is our belief that there will always be lakes and a few streams in the national parks that will remain natural insofar as aquatic life is concerned. The policy further states that in

waters where non-native fish now exist with the native species, the latter will be favored in every instance to the fullest possible extent. The policy further provides that no agency, Federal or State, shall in the future be permitted to plant fish in any national park except with the approval and under the direction of regular National Park employees. The policy further provides that no aquatic vegetation of any kind shall be introduced into the park waters for the purpose of improving fishing. The whole purpose of the policy is to give the National Park Service complete control over the aquatic life in the parks in the same manner as it controls other forms of animal life. The Service also supports the trend away from the use of natural baits, and whenever possible regulations are drawn permitting only the taking of fish by artificial lures.

While this policy is only slightly more than two years old, it has been enthusiastically accepted by the general staff and by the various Superintendents, as well as the American Fisheries Society. The necessity for the strict application of such a policy is apparent from what has already been said. Much more emphasis might well be placed upon its importance.

The insistent demand on the part of sportsmen for more and better fishing everywhere calls for an ever-increasing output and a wider distribution of fish. Unless due regard is given to the species used, this is a permanent threat to waters of the national parks. This demand has been effective in bringing about the establishment of great fish hatcheries within and adjacent to the national parks and national forests. The output of these hatcheries is distributed by the Bureau of Fisheries, State Game Commissions and State

Sportsmen's Organizations in order to "improve" fishing. In order to insure the continued existence of our native fish populations, it is mandatory that a well-trained staff of park employees supervise all fish planting.

While we hope we have succeeded in establishing a policy which will protect the national park waters from further abuse, our position in State parks where the Service has cooperated in development of water resources, has not been clearly defined. An extended field trip was taken early last year inspecting State parks throughout the Middle West. A considerable number of areas were visited where, under our direction, lakes were being created whose primary purpose in many instances is to produce fish. We were disappointed to find that some of these lakes, created at great cost, were stocked with fish before they were really completed. Enthusiastic sportsmen's organizations had, in some cases, improvised small dams creating ponds of an acre or two in the basins where lakes were being developed These same enthusiasts had seined fish from back water pools and planted them in the makeshift ponds long before the dams themselves were completed.

If there is an example of getting the cart before the horse, this certainly is a perfect one. It proves ~~that~~ what I have stated, that there is an insistent demand for fish and fishing without the slightest knowledge of what we are ~~trying to~~ doing do.

The Park Service should work for a better policy with relation to State parks where fishing is to be an important recreational activity. Such a policy would provide that any important lake created by the Service should remain free from the introduction of any fish until such time as conditions

warrant. During this period the chemical analysis of the land surrounding the lake and the water itself should be made in order to determine the aquatic vegetation best adapted to the waters. This vegetation, native if possible, should be introduced, and the development of fish food carefully observed. When all possible information is available, then consideration should be given to the species of fish to be planted -- native forms wherever possible. In most instances, two or three species would be the limit, a desirable species of game fish -- probably two if they were compatible, and then possibly the introduction of one species of forage fish.

It does seem reasonable that, since we have already wrought such havoc because of our lack of planning and study, we should, insofar as possible, protect the waters under our supervision against the same mistakes in the future. The National Park Service has a great opportunity and responsibility for preserving and in some instances restoring the normal relationship between all forms of aquatic life, including fish.

While we are, and I think we shall be, compelled to operate fish hatcheries and maintain reasonably good fishingin the national parks, we should keep constantly in mind the fact that insofar as possible it is our plain duty to maintain the parks in their natural and primitive conditions. To accomplish this we must have complete control over every activity which has to do in any way with changing the natural biological balance in national park waters.

Also, if we are to proceed on a basis of long-time planning, there must be set up in the National Park Service several positions to provide

for scientifically trained men whose duty it shall be to study national park waters and determine the effect of fishing, fish-planting, and all other artificial factors which have to do with changing natural conditions. If our work is to be planned and not just guessed at, this information is essential.

In order to emphasize the importance of this subject let me state that last year 41,000,000 eggs were taken from black spotted trout in Yellowstone Lake. This is probably more wild eggs than will be taken next year in five or six adjoining states. In other words, we do possess within our national parks / the finest natural setup for trout in the entire Rocky Mountain region. I cannot overemphasize the necessity for protecting and preserving this asset.