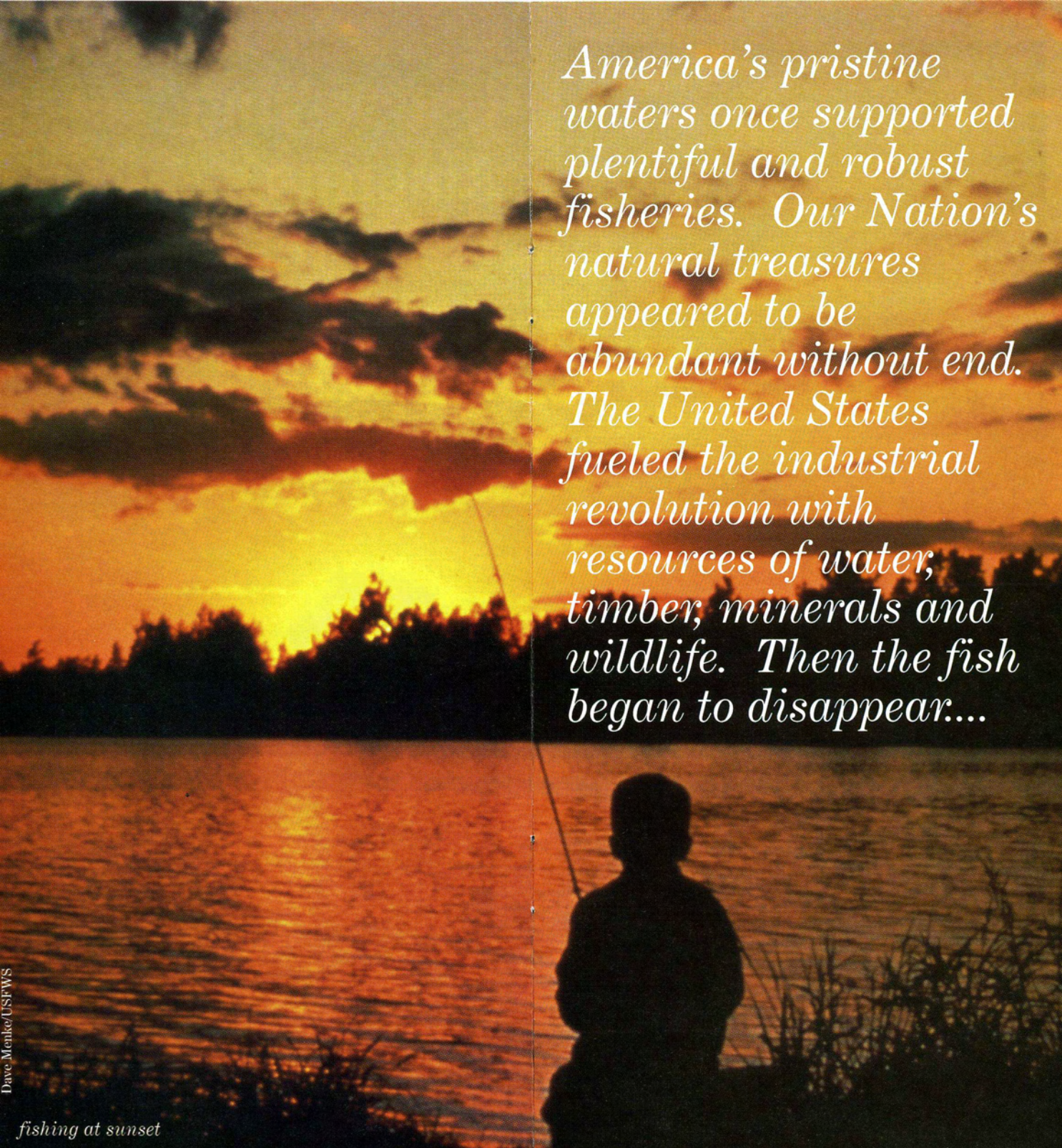
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Conserving America's Fisheries

A Proud Past
A Bright Future



America's pristine waters once supported plentiful and robust fisheries. Our Nation's natural treasures appeared to be abundant without end. The United States fueled the industrial revolution with resources of water, timber, minerals and wildlife. Then the fish began to disappear....

Dave Menke/USFWS

fishing at sunset

Fred Youngblood/USFWS

Fishing

Introduction

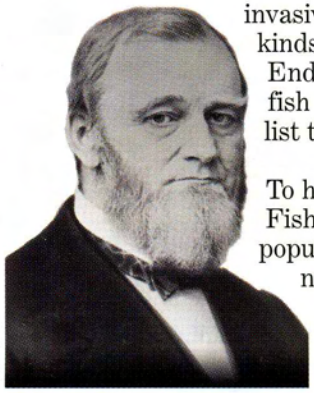
Farming, industrialization, population growth, and overharvest degraded our Nation's water quality and fisheries resources. By the mid-1800's, fishermen recognized a decline in fish populations. In 1871, Spencer Fullerton Baird, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, wrote to Congress urging Federal protection for the Nation's fisheries. Baird warned that the "time is not far distant" that America will lose fish as a source of "subsistence and support," a "calamity that would involve a vast number of evils in its train." Baird's warning was echoed by the American Fish Culturalists' Association (now the American Fisheries Society).

Congress responded by creating the Commission on Fish and Fisheries, the first Federal agency dedicated to the conservation of natural resources. By law, the Commission was to determine if and why fisheries had declined and what actions should be taken. One year later, Congress appropriated funds for the first National Fish Hatchery. The Commission was the predecessor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fisheries Program.

Sand and gravel mining

E. Possardt/USFWS

Today, America's fish are still in trouble. Aquatic habitat is declining because of erosion and sedimentation, altered stream flows, dams and obstructions, pollution and invasive species. More than 100 kinds of fish are listed under the Endangered Species Act, and no fish has been removed from the list through recovery.



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Spencer Fullerton Baird

To help restore our fisheries, the Fisheries Program surveys populations and habitats, raises native fish and other species, and restores habitat to meet the goals of fisheries management plans. We maintain a network of field stations across the country, including 70 National Fish Hatcheries, 1 Historical National Fish Hatchery, 7 Fish Technology Centers, 9 Fish Health Centers, 64 Fishery Resources Offices, and 1 genetics laboratory.

Right: McCloud NFH, California, 1870's

Below: Brook trout illustration

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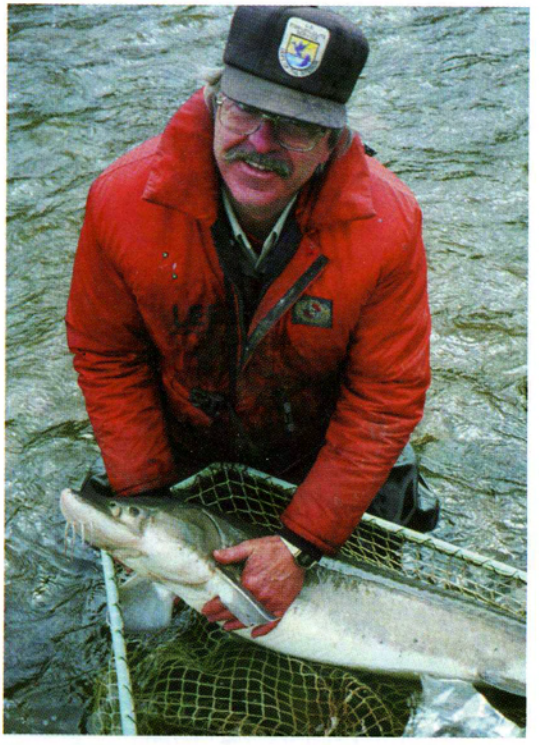
Duane Raver/USFWS

Aquatic Species Conservation and Management



Jeff Slade/USFWS

Interjurisdictional Fisheries

We work with Federal, Canadian, State, Tribal and other conservation partners to restore and manage fish populations that cross state or national boundaries. Self-sustaining populations of freshwater, coastal and anadromous fish (fish that reproduce in fresh water and mature in the ocean) indicate healthy ecosystems and provide recreational and commercial benefits. In the Northeast Region, we use the latest science to restore Atlantic salmon, striped bass, American shad, river herring, Atlantic sturgeon, American eel, and other interjurisdictional fish species.

Above: Sturgeon population assessment

Below: FWS personnel releasing fish

Hollingsworth/USFWS

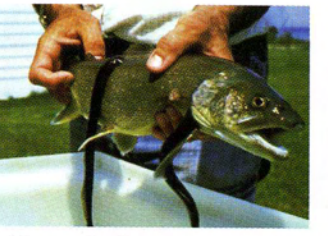
Native Species

We restore declining native fish populations by protecting and restoring habitats and reintroducing fish where appropriate. We work to recover listed species under the Endangered Species Act. The Great Lakes/Big Rivers Region identifies suitable habitats and releases lake trout eggs and yearlings in Lakes Michigan and Huron.

Greg Syverson/USFWS

Sockeye salmon jumping, Brooks Falls, Alaska

We monitor and evaluate fish populations and maintain databases to assist partners in managing fisheries resources. The natural diversity of Alaska's fishery resources is measured by the health, diversity and relative abundance of native populations. Long-term monitoring allows evaluation of the health, relative abundance and protective measures needed to sustain stocks within an ecosystem.



Great Lakes Fishery Commission

Above: Lake trout with lamprey and wound

Right: Native mussel encrusted with zebra mussels

Bottom page: Salmon eggs

Aquatic Nuisance Species

We help in preventing and controlling the spread of aquatic nuisance species in partnership with Federal, State, Tribal, and other conservation organizations. For example, we support the 100th Meridian Initiative to help prevent the spread of zebra mussels into the West. We also work with international partners to control the parasitic sea lamprey.

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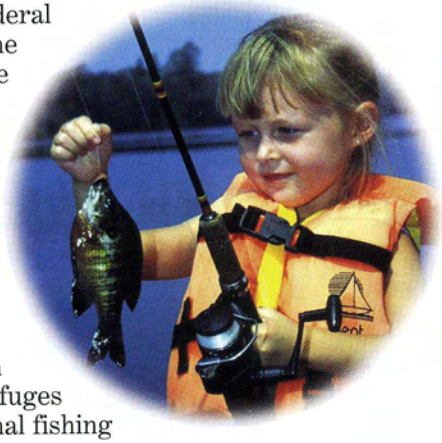
Fly fishing

Public Use

We enhance fishing opportunities by improving habitats and producing millions of fish for restoration and mitigation of Federal water projects. In the Southeast Region, we work in partnership with States to release more than 6 million fish annually to support recreational fisheries as one way to mitigate the impacts of federal dams. We work with National Wildlife Refuges to provide recreational fishing opportunities. Our American heritage includes a rich history of recreational fishing; the Fisheries Program helps assure its rich future.



Carl Zitzman/USFWS

Above: Young girl fishing, NC
Eugene Hester/USFWS

Left: Children fishing

Cooperation with Native American Tribal Nations

We partner with Tribes to restore fish and wildlife and their habitats and to develop fishing and hunting programs. The Southwest Region assists the White Mountain Apache Tribe in restoring the Apache trout and its habitat, a project started by the Tribe in the 1940's. Once listed as "endangered" and facing extinction, the Apache trout has been up-graded to "threatened" and is near full recovery We work closely with Tribal governments to fulfill Federal trust responsibilities to Native American peoples.

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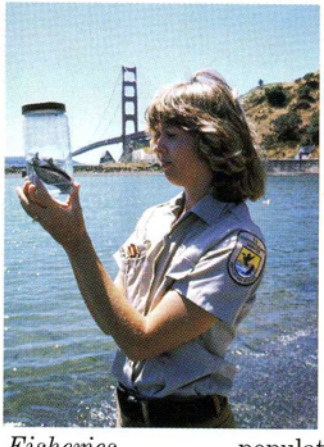
Apache trout

Leadership in Aquatic Science and Technology

We provide leadership in the development and application of state-of-the-art science and technology for the conservation and management of fish and other aquatic species and their habitats. In the Pacific Region, Fish Health Centers inspect hatchery fish for pathogens and diagnose diseases. Remedial treatments are recommended to improve fish health management. The health of wild fish is closely monitored to assist in the recovery of endangered Pacific salmon and other fish. By careful monitoring of fish population health, we help prevent species from being listed as threatened or endangered. In addition, Fish Technology Centers apply research, develop new technologies, and solve specific problems in hatchery operations and fisheries management.



Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

Fisheries Assistant

Scott Carney

Left: Breaching dam

Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Management

We determine habitat needs for fish populations, and identify where improvements can be made. Dams and other man-made barriers threaten many fish populations. We work with others to provide water quality, quantity and fish passage needs in rivers and streams. Fishery Resources Offices in the Mountain-Prairie Region develop fish passage for paddlefish and the endangered pallid sturgeon, and restore riparian habitats. Reintroduction of hatchery-reared pallid sturgeon and paddlefish, harvest management, and habitat restoration and protection help ensure the conservation of our Nation's fisheries.

Conserving America's Fisheries

Americans love fish. We catch them for food, income, and recreation. We photograph them, display them on walls, and watch them in aquariums. We pursue them in pristine wilderness and crowded urban waters. But America's vital fish resources are still threatened by habitat degradation, pollution, dams, competition from invasive species and over-harvest.

The Fisheries Program works for the public to conserve species and their habitats. By diligent application of sound science, effective management practices, and dedicated partnerships, the Fisheries Program helps ensure sustainable use of America's fish for today and tomorrow.

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