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PROGRAM SPEEDED TO SAVE RARE ARIZONA TROUT

A program to save the rare native Arizona (or Apache) trout is being stepped up. Sponsored jointly by Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Arizona and New Mexico fishery agencies, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Apache tribe, the program is designed to protect the habitat of the fish and, if necessary, to increase its numbers by artificial propagation.

Once the Arizona trout was found in 360 miles of stream. Today the survivors can be found only in two small mountain streams--Ord Creek and the upper end of the White River's East Fork--on the 1,664,872-acre Fort Apache Reservation in east-central Arizona. The landlords are about 4,000 Apaches, who are cooperating in the effort to save the rare fish.

The Arizona trout is much smaller than the non-native rainbow and the Yellowstone cutthroat, which have been stocked in downstream waters. The small size of its two streams, and the resulting scarce food supply, has limited the average size of the fish to 5 to 6 inches, though it may reach 16 inches. Its back is a dark olive green and its belly and sides yellow gold. The yellow-gold color is always present in the pure strain and is often present in hybrid strains. It has minute scales and its spots are black and sharp; many of the spots are circled.

The Arizona trout spawns in March and April. The female lays between 200 and 600 eggs. Its nesting is similar to that of the rainbow trout. The female digs a "redd"--a shallow, round depression in gravel under running water. As she drops the eggs, the male, who is at her side, fertilizes them. The eggs are then covered with gravel and incubation begins. This requires 5 to 6 weeks; then the fry hatch, rise from under the gravel and begin searching for their food--small organisms in the stream.

For many years both specialists and laymen thought that the Arizona trout and the Gila trout of New Mexico were identical. They had long been neighbors. The Gila River flows across the width of Arizona and traverses part of New Mexico; the Gila trout was once distributed more widely throughout the river system. Today, like the Arizona species, the Gila is endangered; changes in stream ecology and the introduction of competitive species have restricted it to two small tributary streams.

In 1950, when Dr. R. R. Miller classified the New Mexico native trout as Salmo gila, he and many others assumed the Arizona trout was identical.

But recent study by biologists has shown that they may be distinct species. Danny M. Regan, studying the Gila trout at the Colorado Fishery Unit, Colorado State University, has found some measurable differences in fin length and body proportions between the Gila and Arizona trouts. One outstanding difference is the spotting. The Gila trout has spots that are round to oval and tend to be fine and dense, particularly on the dorsal and tail fins. The Arizona trout has fewer but larger spots, some as large as the pupil of its eye.

In the summer of 1964, the White Mountain Apache Tribe and the Bureau of Indian Affairs asked the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife to study the Arizona native trout and recommend a program to save it.

John K. Andersen, Bureau biologist, studied the problem and recommended that 15-foot vertical dams be built on the two streams to prevent the upstream migration of competing fishes--and that the water upstream of the barriers be restocked with the Arizona native trout.

He suggested, too, that a small lake be constructed where the trout would be able to maintain its own population by spawning in a live stream feeding the lake. If hatchery propagation becomes necessary or desirable, the lake would be a good source of eggs.

Eventually, the Arizona native trout will be given a scientific name and, together with the Gila trout, may be brought back form the edge of extinction. The need is urgent. Both rare fish are presently at the mercy of an act of nature or man: a forest fire, a natural catastrophe, or a pesticide could destroy them. But, if things go according to plans for the next few years, there may even be limited fishing again for these trouts.

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