NPS INTERVIEW: PAT BIGELOW, FISHERIES BIOLOGIST

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Pat Bigelow intended to spend just one summer in Montana—until she landed a seasonal job working on Yellowstone Lake. Several decades and a Ph.D. in fish and wildlife management later, she's now a fisheries biologist for Yellowstone National Park. We recently caught up with Pat about her role in preserving the park's native fish population.

How did you come to work for Yellowstone?

I grew up in Vermont and expected to live there for the rest of my life, but thought it would be wise to spend a summer in a completely different environment. I got a work-study job in Bozeman, Montana, and later discovered a seasonal job with the Young Adult Conservation Corps in Yellowstone. I worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and we'd spend the whole day on Yellowstone Lake—that's when I really fell in love with the park. After that, I worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Colorado, California, Washington, Montana, and Idaho, until the fisheries biologist position in Yellowstone became available.

What challenges are facing fisheries in Yellowstone?

In Yellowstone Lake—my area of focus—lake trout predation is the biggest challenge for the lake's native fish, Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Lake trout aren't native to the lake, and because cutthroat trout didn't evolve with other fish predators, they have no defense strategy. Lake trout are super-efficient predators and they can easily decimate the cutthroat population.

Why are native fish so important to the Yellowstone ecosystem?

I was fortunate to work here when the cutthroat population was extremely healthy, so I remember what it was like to see thousands of them running up a stream, or to see grizzly bears fishing along the lake. Yellowstone's cutthroat trout are one way the aquatic ecosystem connects with the terrestrial, and it's important to do all that we can to preserve the integrity of these connections. On top of that, Yellowstone cutthroat are a beautiful fish, and they're easy to catch. Not only are they important to the environment, but they also provide an opportunity for people to personally connect with the ecosystem.

What efforts is the National Park Service involved in to preserve native fish in Yellowstone Lake?

We're removing lake trout from the population to give cutthroat the ability to rebuild their numbers and approach population levels that we had in the 1980s—which were much higher than today. We utilize crews that directly remove the lake trout through gillnetting. And with the levels of effort we've been exerting over the last few years, we're seeing a substantial decrease in the adult lake trout out there. However, we're not able to gillnet all the lake trout out of Yellowstone Lake, so we've been researching alternative methods for removing them. The last few years we've been working with graduate students on ideas for eradicating lake trout eggs and fry from spawning areas, as well as using telemetry to inform the strategy of our gillnetters.

How has Yellowstone Forever supported the Native Fish Conservation Program?

In addition to providing funding for the program, Yellowstone Forever has been hugely supportive in giving people the opportunity to help preserve the native fisheries through education and by simply spreading the word. You can't achieve public support without education.

What can park visitors do to help preserve Yellowstone's native fish?

Go fishing! Visitors can keep as many lake trout as they catch. They're pretty tasty when cooked—especially the smaller ones—or you can even try canning them. Just keep in mind cutthroat trout are catch-and-release only. Get out on the lake and catch some lake trout!

Yellowstone Forever is proud to support the park's Native Fish Conservation Program. **Learn more**.
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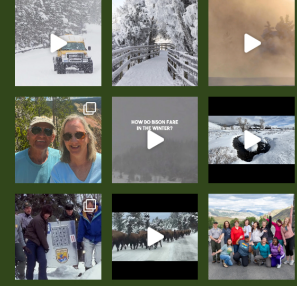
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