

Local Trout Unlimited Chapter Helps Park Service Open Streams to Brook Trout Fishing

By Gary Verholek, Little River Trout Unlimited

In a news release today, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park announced the opening of Park streams for Brook trout fishing for the first time in over 30 years. This is a milestone event for the Park and for an avid group of supporters from several communities in East Tennessee known as the Little River Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Biologists in the early '70's were convinced that brook trout were losing range to the non-native Rainbow and Brown trout, and that fishing pressure was further reducing Brook trout numbers. In 1976, in response to these concerns, managers closed over 150 miles of Park streams where "Brookies" were predominate and initiated Brook trout restoration projects in select streams.

In the spirit of the TU mission of '*conserving, protecting and restoring coldwater fisheries and watersheds*', the Little River Chapter of Trout Unlimited was formed in 1992 to directly support the NPS Fisheries Department efforts. The initial 17-member core quickly grew to an active group of almost 300, and has been a unique source of manpower and funds for Brookie restoration. Their efforts include hosting fund raising events such as TROUTFEST in Townsend (see related article), which provided over \$20,000 in the past two years.

With LRCTU assistance, Park fisheries biologists have found that "Brookies" are able to co-exist with the non-native trout in 69 miles of Park streams. Park fisheries managers and LRCTU members subsequently restored 17 miles of stream to pure Brook trout populations, and more are scheduled for restoration.

After over 25 years of study, Park biologists had observed that natural occurrences such as floods and droughts were the major force behind changes in fish populations in both open and closed streams. They suspected that allowing angling for

Brook trout would have no measurable impact on fish population or size.

In 2002 Park biologists tested that hypothesis on eight streams (4 in TN, 4 in NC). The study found there were no significant differences in any stream opened to brook trout fishing during the study period. Variations that did occur were attributable to natural variation and were not related to fishing pressure.

"Given that we could find no ecological benefit to prohibiting anglers from taking brook trout," said Park Supervisory Fisheries Biologist, Steve Moore, "and the opportunity to offer anglers a very enjoyable experience, Park management has decided to open nearly all our streams to fishing."

"So on April 15," Moore concluded, "All but a handful of the over 700 miles of Park streams will be opened to fishing as part of an experimental regulation to allow additional time to monitor impacts of fishing activity."

During active Brook trout restoration projects on parts of Sams Creek, Bear Creek, and Indian Flats Prong, which have been recently restored, streams will remain closed while those populations continue to rebuild.

LRCTU members proudly display a citation for their unflagging efforts and generous support presented at the recent GSMNP Volunteer Appreciation Banquet by Steve Moore on behalf of Park Superintendent Dale Ditmanson. Moore specifically cited LRCTU for providing over 40,000 volunteer hours and collecting over 10 tons of trash along Little River. Awards notwithstanding, the LRCTU members are proud of their meaningful contribution and vow to continue their efforts on behalf of the diminutive but beautiful little Brookie.

Contact LRCTU at www.lrctu.org or www.troutfest.org; contact the author at gverholek@chartertn.net.