

— Guest Column —

Learning from Fisheries Mistakes of the Past

by Spencer Belson, Age 16

In Sebago, salmon fishing can be divided into two time periods – before togue, and after togue.

In years past, I dreamed of catching the numerous six-pound brook trout Carrie Stevens encountered at Upper Dam, or the monster 22.5-pound salmon pulled from Sebago in 1907, or even the countless blueback trout that inhabited the Rangeley Region before the introduction of other species. That was, until I realized none of this is possible today, because of errors in judgment made by past generations.

As a member of the youngest group of anglers, I have a lot to look forward to in my fishing future. Maine has countless incredible angling opportunities, and with the lifetime license I purchased before my 16th birthday, I'll be able to enjoy the fisheries of this great state for years to come. That is, if we don't make the same detrimental errors as we have before.

Good Intentions; Detrimental Results

Years ago, believing they were improving Maine's fisheries, biologists introduced invasive species to many of the state's pristine waters. In some places, these introduced fish had negative effects on the native species.

Such was the case of the Arctic charr in Rangeley, which were

completely wiped out when landlocked Atlantic salmon and rainbow smelt were stocked from other parts of the state. Other times, the alien species managed to somewhat coexist with those indigenous to that body of water, but still had harmful impacts on the native populations.

Sebago Lake – Case Study

In Sebago, salmon fishing can be divided into two time frames: before togue, and after togue, with the salmon populations after togue being far smaller, both in numbers and size of fish.

When fisheries biologists stocked togue in the 1970s, their goal was to diversify angling opportunities, and to rebuild fish populations after a drastic decline due to 1960s DDT spraying. Now, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife admits to their mistake, and has established bag limits targeted at depleting the populations of these salmon competitors. Whether or not these measures are working is unclear.

The truth about this situation is that no one is to blame; those that advocated for the nonnative species truly believed they would improve

our fisheries.

One could claim that all of these issues could have been prevented with advanced testing that would have shed light on just how destructive those stocking practices would have been. But we must accept the fact that this was not how things were done back then. Still, we can learn from those mistakes in order to conserve the fisheries of tomorrow.

New Approach?

It is undeniable that, now more than ever, there is a movement to protect native fish. Catch-and-release practices have become as common as the 12-fish stringers of yesteryear. Barbless hooks have made a splash in the world of fly fishing, and rubber nets help protect the slime coatings on more delicate species.

Most impactful of all, though, is the increased education of outdoorspeople. No doubt anglers would be unwilling to adopt these practices unless they understood the benefits the practices will have for the health of our fisheries.

Last summer, I took a 6-year-old boy out fishing. When I suggested he take the largemouth bass he caught all on his own out of the water for a photograph, he de-



The author holding a Sebago togue. While these lake trout may have increased the overall fishing opportunities in the Big Lake, many anglers believe it was an error to introduce what proved to be a direct competitor to landlocked salmon. Belson photo



You can learn a lot about the future of fisheries management by taking a very young kid fishing, says the author. Belson photo

clined. "Let's keep it in the water," he suggested. "I don't want to hurt it."

The youngest generation in today's world is far more conservation-minded than those of the past. While not many years ago kids would be excited to take their catch home, children

now prefer to release their fish for others to enjoy.

We should be optimistic about the future of fishing – a future that will only be possible if we manage our fisheries responsibly today.

