

# 2020-2021 Youth Writing Contest Winner

Senior Category – New England (Grades 9–12)

## Through Tough Times

by Spencer Belson, 9th Grade, Andover, MA High School

*An encounter with an invasive fish leads the author to contemplate mankind's threats to Maine's native brook trout, as well as that species' resilience.*

Finally, the bass splashed into my net, its bronze back gleaming in the dwindling daylight. Sure, it was a stunning fish, but it sparked fury deep in my chest.

Just hours earlier, my family and I had been jouncing along a 20-mile-long logging road, traveling far into the spruce forests of Western Maine. The seclusion of our family's cabin meant I was rarely fortunate enough to visit. From past experience, however, I knew the fishing was well worth the journey.

Upon arrival at camp, my mind was set on getting on the water as fast as possible. In my excitement, I barely noticed the maple leaves, tinted gorgeous hues of orange, yellow, and red, gleaming in the mid-September sun.

Soon I was at the river, hauling my fly line through the air, then shooting it forward into the swirling river. It didn't take long before I felt that undeniable tug at the other end of the line. I set the hook, and my line screamed across the water. Eventually, I gained the upper hand, and the fish swam exhausted towards my outstretched net. Unfortunately, as I scooped it up, I realized something devastating.

Despite the logging roads, I thought of these woods as untouched, yet even here, in this pristine wilderness, was obvious evidence of mankind. It sent shivers down my spine to realize that not even the backwoods of Maine were safe from human impact. I glared at the smallmouth bass with

disgust, disappointed at whoever put these fish in the watershed without a thought towards the consequences to the entire ecosystem. Once a gem of native coldwater species, this river was now overrun with highly invasive bass.

My mind grappled with the possibility of killing the creature. I knew it didn't belong there. Nonetheless, the answer was right in front of me, in the fish's beating heart, gleaming eyes, and quivering fins. I returned the smallmouth to the river.

Throughout the rest of the weekend, my mind raced to determine how the bass had found its way to the river. Whatever the case, the answer always came back to one common theme: people. It wasn't the first time humans had



Spencer Belson fly fishing in Western Maine, on a visit from his home state of Massachusetts. Photo by David Belson, the author's father

meddled with the area, though. For decades, loggers had clear-cut the land of its trees, turning lush forests into barren wastelands. Now, the damage was less obvious, but just as devastating to those who care.

On our final day at the cabin, I caught a gorgeous, wild brook trout. Its royal blue flanks and burnt orange belly hinted at its superb health, reminding me of the re-

silency of the species. Like the spruce and maples that returned after the work of loggers, the brook trout has persisted through even the toughest of times. The reflection of the woods rippled as the fish swam back to the depths of the river, where its species had swum for centuries past, and as I hoped they would for many more to come.



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