

Rebirth of a Hatchery: A Fish Tale

Adam Miller, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

August 28, 2011 is a day that most Vermonters will never forget. The destruction caused by Tropical Storm Irene threatened lives, uprooted families and destroyed businesses. One piece of infrastructure, about which you may not know, sustained heavy damages from the rising waters of the White River. Prior to Irene, the White River National Fish Hatchery, owned and operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Bethel, had been raising and distributing Atlantic salmon into the Connecticut River as part of a restoration program. Totally incapacitated and in need of significant repairs, it wasn't until *this year* that the hatchery came back online.

If you're asking, "So what?" let me tell you. As a member of the Fish Culture Section for the VT Fish and Wildlife Department, my team has two main goals: restoring fisheries and increasing recreational angling opportunities through the "culture," or raising, of fish. Both goals revolve around just one key theme: people's connection to the environment. It is only when people have a personal connection, a touchstone to nature when we can best do our job to protect, conserve, and promote the natural world as we all know it for future generations. For many Vermonters, fish embody that connection.

As an angler in Vermont, I love hitting the water in pursuit of my favorite fish species. I relish the time I spend outdoors with friends and family, disconnected from the daily grind and part of something much bigger than myself. The fulfillment I feel when I catch a fish that is going home to feed my family is like none other. And it makes me recognize the importance of protecting this natural world for the future.



But this kind of a connection with nature doesn't just involve the consumptive user, which is evident if you travel to Orleans in the early spring. There, you'll find dozens of people lining the banks of the Willoughby River, eagerly awaiting a quick flash of silver as steelhead rainbow trout jump Willoughby Falls, migrating upstream to spawn. Many of these people have driven hours to a small town in the Northeast Kingdom just to see the spectacle of these elegant, determined creatures fighting the rapids with their whole being – driven by the need to ensure the future of their species.

Nor is it just seeing or catching fish that can sustain people's connection with the outdoors. Many of us will never see a lake sturgeon, an endangered species, in Vermont – although I hope you do someday as they are an amazing species. Yet we feel a societal obligation to protect this living fossil which has existed for over 135 million years on earth. There is an intrinsic value in a species that arises just in that it exists in the world alongside us.

Fish can connect us all with our natural world, and it is that connection that sustains our work to protect and conserve our natural resources for not just us, but for the future. So you'll understand why, on July 7th, the grand re-opening of the White River National Fish Hatchery was such a celebration. A direct result of the perseverance and determination of the public along with local, state, and federal officials, the re-opening reestablished operations at a key piece of federal infrastructure in the mission of fisheries conservation and restoration. Without fish culture as one of the many tools we use, it would be increasingly difficult to maintain a population of fish for recreational anglers and we would struggle in our fisheries restoration efforts. Simply put, without fish, we lose a huge opportunity to connect people to nature.

Adam Miller is the Fish Culture Operations Manager for the VT Fish & Wildlife Department where he has overseen a major initiative to incorporate energy efficiencies and renewable energy into State Fish Culture operations. He lives in central Vermont with his wife – whom he met working at a remote fish culture facility in Alaska – and when he's not helping the State save over \$100,000/year through energy efficiency programs, you can find him in the woods hunting or teaching his daughter to love fishing just as much as he does.



Staff from US Fish and Wildlife Service, VT ANR, and VT Fish & Wildlife Department pose for a triumphant picture outside of the White River National Fish Hatchery at the grand reopening ceremony alongside Senator Patrick Leahy and Rep. Peter Welch.