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### On Opening Day of Trout Season

*Deanna Spooner*

Call it fate, but being born on the opening day of trout season (in California, generally the last Saturday of April) has had a strange influence over my life. At the tender age of 2, my father put a rod in my hand, and I've been plying the waters ever since. I've fished California north to south and west to east, from its churning surf to its mountain lakes, and have caught just about every type of fish out there: corvina, perch, bass, bluegill, shad, trout, steelhead, salmon and many more.

Trout fishing occupies a special place in my heart because it allows me to combine two of my passions: hiking and fishing. I love nothing better than ambling up into a remote area and hooking into a hungry trout. Wild trout are the best, because they tend to be bigger, smarter and better fighters. And you can find trout just about anywhere in the state.

That's both good and bad. The ubiquitousness of trout makes for nearly limitless fishing opportunities; that's the good news. The bad news is that for over a hundred years we humans have stocked trout in places where nature didn't intend them to be. Only gradually have we come to see the unintentional harm we have caused to the ecosystem.

Indiscriminate fish stocking has contributed to the decline of many of California's native trout species, such as Lahontan cutthroat trout, Paiute cutthroat trout and golden trout, the state fish. Scientists from the University of California and the U.S. Forest Service, among others, have shown that the introduction of trout in historically fish-free high-elevation lakes has dramatically impacted other native critters, including native amphibians, reptiles and even birds. The California Department of Fish and Game is starting to address this serious and complex problem, but the going has been slow and the institutional will weak.

The first step the agency should take is to conduct a statewide assessment of fish-stocking programs to identify where harmful effects are occurring and to which native species. The assessment should identify three categories of actions:

- where the effects of fish stocking are so advanced they can't be remedied, then do nothing – especially in most large rivers or reservoirs, where application of rotenone or other poisons that kill off fish, amphibians and aquatic invertebrates would have substantial environmental impacts;
- where fish stocking has never occurred, don't start;
- where the effects of fish stocking are reversible and native species can recover, then design and implement a recovery program. This program can include several different tools, such as removal of introduced fish, curtailing or halting stocking, or relocating stocking practices outside of the sensitive areas.

Many Californians care deeply about enjoying both high-quality fishing opportunities and protecting the state's rich native biodiversity. We can have both if the Department of Fish and Game chooses to work with, not against, nature.

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