

Brook trout advocate says climate change doing damage

By Dan Ladd
Editor

Ithaca, N.Y. — When it comes to brook trout, Keith Tidball is all business.

The New York State Conservation Council's first vice president, who is a scientist at Cornell University's Department of Natural Resources and Environment, isn't afraid to speak his mind about how he feels climate change is having a dramatic affect on brook trout ecosystems, primarily in the Adirondacks and Catskills. At the very least, he says a conversation soon needs to be had within the angling community about what can be done about it.

Tidball is among a growing number of serious brook trout anglers who are not only concerned about the future of their favorite fish species, but are willing to do something about it.

While his work at Cornell may not center around fishing, as he got more involved in Trout Power (see NYON Sept. 3 Commentary), and more concerned about trout habitat, Tidball stepped across the isle and engaged with his colleagues at Cornell where he learned



The author (l) and researcher Laura O'Brien of the New York State Council of Trout Unlimited work to evaluate culverts and fords in an effort to better understand connectivity for trout in the Beaver River watershed in the western Adirondacks. Although this project is not related to stream water temperatures, the author is concerned about their effect on brook trout populations

Photo by Sam Levine

more about the problem, but also made some encouraging discoveries, primarily, the Adirondack Cold-water Fisheries and Climate Variability Project.

"Brook trout can't tolerate water temps above 68 degrees.

A lot of the traditional habitat in the Adirondacks and in their range, is the waters are warming unfortunately above that threshold, so we're seeing die-offs," Tidball said. "So as a result of the issue, which is a concern to me as an angler and

beyond the fact that I'm a scientist, I actually went over and talked to our fisheries experts in the department of natural resources and environment here at Cornell. They had been doing research in the Adirondacks for many years at a place called the Adirondack Fisheries Research Program, which has a field station called Little Moose Field Station in the Adirondack League Club properties.

"What I learned with reintroducing myself to faculty members, is that there's concern that the fish are under a lot of stress and are at risk," Tidball continued. "They've been doing longitudinal level testing for many decades and publishing these in scientific journals."

Tidball said the Adirondack League Club provides an endowment for fisheries research for the lakes they manage in their private holdings, which is done for best management practices for a world class trout fishery. The lab exists independent of this project, but collaborates on, both in and out of New York, with brook trout initiatives often brought forth by groups like Trout Unlimited

Trout Power's citizen science

efforts are occasionally finding evidence to suggest that heritage strain brook trout seem to have more resilience or adaptive capacity to stick it out, even though there's acid rain and the temperatures are a little warmer says Tidball. "So, what research is happening now is to determine if there are some heritage strains of Adirondack brook trout that have higher adaptive capacity and can withstand higher water temperatures. That's going to be the key to keeping them around until we stop this trend of warming water and get that turned around."

As for that warming trend, Tidball says getting through to fellow anglers is going to be crucial, and it's not going to be easy as climate change can be a contentious subject.

"Part of my issue is doing the education around that and trying to address audiences that I know are not going to be immediately open to conversations around climate variability because of politics," he said. "I'm a pretty conservative dude, but I put my politics aside when it comes to hunting and fishing."

Trout Power, meanwhile, has been handing out educational materials and meeting with anglers at farmers markets and museums. Tidball said he intends to gather as many science journal articles as he can and share them via an online clearinghouse.

While Cornell's work is through its own initiative and not through the state Department of Environmental Conservation, Tidball said it was announced at the Conservation Council's recent convention that a brook trout management plan is anticipated.

This is all "timely" Tidball said, therefore he feels it's time for anglers to talk about climate change and brook trout in the same conversation.

"Let's not talk about green energy or the sort of subjects that are hot-button political issues, let's just slow everything down and get aback to hanging out at the bar or the sportsman's club and say, 'the science is showing that the little pond where we go to catch 20-inch brook trout is 2 degrees warmer every 10 years,'" he said. "And we know these fish can't live if it's more than 68 degrees. So, what can we, as anglers do to get together and not fight about the politics? If we sit around and argue about the politics for very much longer, that puddle that has brook trout, well, there won't be any brook trout in there and you can't bring it back."

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Michael Schoer, of Brooklyn, caught and released this smallmouth bass while fishing in the Delaware River near Portland, Pa., on Sept. 18.