

SOS for Kings River - Floaters, fisheries experts discuss issues on popular stream

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What's in a name?

According to Sen. Bryan King, R-Green Forest, the Kings River is named after Henry King, an early settler. The river's name is sometimes misspelled King's River, with an apostrophe. The river flows some 90 miles through Madison and Carroll counties before emptying into Table Rock Lake east of Eagle Rock, Mo.

- Source: Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

Kings River isn't the stream it used to be, some anglers and floaters say. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission agrees.

Over the years, floods have eaten away at shorelines that are devoid of vegetation and caused erosion. That's created a wider, shallower river. Deep holes of clear water are filling up with gravel. Fish habitat, especially for smallmouth bass, has been damaged. Fishing isn't what it used to be, savvy Kings River anglers say.

Those and other issues were discussed at a Sept. 28 meeting in Eureka Springs of frequent Kings River visitors, local residents and officials with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. Jeff Fletcher of Eagle Rock, Mo., and state Sen. Bryan King, R-Green Forest, organized the meeting. Fletcher has been a fishing guide on the river since he was 12. He's 54 now. The stream flows through King's senate district.

"We've seen a progression in the last five or six years of more gravel in the river," Fletcher said to an audience of about 40 people.

Erosion of the shoreline is a primary cause of wider, shallower conditions, according to several of the meeting's speakers. Clearing vegetation and trees all the way to the water's edge results in dirt banks that release tons of silt and gravel into the river during high water.

Jon Stein, area fisheries biologist with Game and Fish, noted at the meeting that one

section of the Kings near Grandview in Carroll County was 127 feet wide in 1994. It's now 500 feet wide.

Pools of clear water that were once 6 to 8 feet deep are now only 4 feet deep, Fletcher said, because they're filling up with gravel. The river gets lower faster now so floating season is shorter. That impacts outfitters on the popular float stream, as well as Fletcher's guide business.

Fifteen or 20 years ago, the river could be floated eight months of the year, he noted. At times the river gets

so low that some outfitters close temporarily, then reopen when the water level rises. After that, the window of good floating opportunity is about 10 to 14 days until the stream again gets too low to float, the guide said.

Fletcher said it's hoped the meeting will be the first step to improving conditions on the stream.

"If we don't start to do something about it, it's just going to get worse," he said.

Game and Fish Director Austin Booth agreed that Kings River fishing has declined, that habitat is being lost and there's less water. Nearly every stream in the state is filling up with silt and gravel, Booth said. He cited poor riparian zones, which are a river's shoreline close to the water, as the reason. A strip of land several yards wide with native grasses, trees and plants such as river cane, is an ideal riparian zone. Their roots keep stream banks from washing away.

Ben Batten, a Game and Fish deputy director, said if only one action could be taken, it would be to replant vegetation where needed to keep those banks from adding silt and gravel to the water.

Arkansas has 90,000 miles of streams, Batten noted.

"A yard of stream bank stabilization costs about \$1,000," he said.

Some funding is available to organizations, agencies and landowners interested in tackling stream habitat projects.

People at the meeting pointed to the success of a bank stabilization project completed years ago by The Nature Conservancy on the Kings upstream from Rockhouse access.

"You can tell immediately the difference in the river when you float into that area and then when you float out of it," one attendee said.

Deteriorating fish habitat caused by erosion is the root cause of the decline in smallmouth bass numbers and size anglers have noticed. Harvest isn't the problem.

"You can't stock your way out or regulate your way out of bad habitat," Batten said.

When floods happen during spawning time in the spring, they muddy the water creating poor spawning habitat. Smallmouths spawn naturally in Ozark streams. Clear, clean water is best for fish reproduction.

Most anglers release all the smallmouth bass they catch, according to research on the Kings. Stein said Game and Fish conducted a creel survey of fishermen as they ended float trips at access points. Anglers during the survey period reported catching 1,300 smallmouth bass, but only 13 fish, or 1%, were kept. The same results were seen during a creel survey at Crooked Creek in north central Arkansas, another stream famous for smallmouth fishing.

Over the years, some anglers have supported making Kings River totally catch and release for smallmouths, but Stein said with a 99% release rate, "catch and release is already there."

Regulations are strict. On some sections of the Kings, smallmouth bass must be 18 inches or longer to keep and the daily limit is one. On other stretches, smallmouths must be 14 inches or longer to keep. Daily limit is two.

Game and Fish has placed high-tech cameras along the stream at times that lets biologists see which boats on the river contain fishing gear. Stein said most people on the river are just floating and not fishing.

King noted that more and more people are floating the stream as the population of Northwest Arkansas grows. Stein said Game and Fish is working to improve access on the Illinois River and War Eagle River to take some of the floating traffic away from the Kings River.

Fletcher told the audience that, during the 1990s and early 2000s, it was common for his customers to catch and release 50 smallmouth bass per angler on most trips. Now it's more like 25.

"Back then, 25 would have been a horrible day."

Those days when Fletcher and two anglers would catch 150 fish are over, the guide said. He hopes habitat will be improved and floating will return, at least partially, to what it once was. He realizes it will be an uphill battle.

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