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Fish and Game

By Tracy Lamanec

After several trips to the Hudson River to fish for striped bass in an attempt to catch some fish of decent size on a fly rod, we struck paydirt one evening last week. If there at the right time and able to cast to the right place, there seemed to be no limit to the number of stripers one could catch below the Troy Dam. The only problem was that most were small with those over 15 inches being a real rarity.

Ed Vanover discoverd a new spot that he took me to where we caught fish from 18 to 23 inches. What's more we were able to wade right to the fish and best of all, we had the place all to ourselves. I am sworn to try to keep it that way, so I will only tell you that it is not even in the Hudson River, but in the Mohawk.

This brings up the very interesting question as to whether it is even legal to fish there. Under the heading "Special Regulations by County," one will find: "Hudson River, Troy Dam upstream to Fort Edward, and tributaries in this section of Hudson upstream to first barrier impassable by fish – fishing prohibited." Obviously, if striped bass are there, then any barriers downstream of that point are not impassable by fish and we were fishing illegally. What is more, the herring that come from salt water make it through the locks all the way to Herkimer or beyond. It is their fry that provide the forage to make the Mohawk the tremendous fishery it is. Does this mean that essentially the whole Mohawk is closed to fishing?

No, that regulation is only listed for counties that border that section of the Hudson River, like Albany, Saratoga, Rensselaer and Washington. Schenectady, Montgomery, Schoharie and so on are not included. Nonetheless, it still puts DEC in the position of having a regulation that if interpreted to the letter, prohibits fishing in an area where they are trying hard to promote it.

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Why does the regulation even exist? The answer is for purely political and not sensible reasons based on biological, public health and safety or recreational opportunity considerations.

The Hudson River, from Fort Edward downstream is known to be contaminated by PCB's. Selected fish samples from there have been found to contain far in excess of what is thought to be a potentially dangerous level of the chemical.

PCB is not a pesticide designed to be toxic but a dielectric fluid which was though for many years to be inert. With no regulation prohibiting it, large amounts were dumped into the Hudson by two GE plants at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls. Other companies may also have contributed some and though the plant discharges have stopped, leaching from old dump sites may be a problem for decades.

The state and the General Electric Co. have spent several millions of dollars to study the problem. State and local politicians and bureaucrats are trying to spend many times that amount to attempt to remove the PCB's from the river and put the material in other "safer" landfills. This is proposed in the spirit of cleaning up the environment which no one really opposes until they weight the costs and other risks. It would provide a lot of local jobs and best of all it wouldn't cost local money. Sure the state would pay some but "we can get federal money." There is nothing magic about federal money, it comes out of our pockets, too, whether as taxes or inflation, the effect of spending more than you collect in taxes.

These politicians would also extract every last cent they could out of GE and also go back to Monsanto Chemical Co., the producer of the material. It can do great things for the posture of a politician to take on such corporate giants.

The federal government has already refused to fund such an effort so Commissioner Flacke has proposed to divert other federal water cleanup money to it. To use the old adage, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, that money would best be spent on treatment plants as it was intended.

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Aside from the enormous cost to the taxpayer, in my semi-technical opinion, the risk of the attempted cleanup is too great. The material has already begun to stabilize. To stir it up will send much of it downriver to add to the contamination there plus the land disposal sites for the dredgings will be unfit for any other use and not all that safe. Impact on the environment of the river bottom and the surrounding land will be severe.

This is precisely the stand that New York State took when the shoe was on the other foot and Vermont tried to force New York and International Paper to clean up the sludge bed in Lake Champlain.

Somehow these politicians must feel that they are furthering their cause by prohibiting fishing in that area, when in fact to reopen it with a well publicized advisory concerning the health hazards of eating the fish would produce local tourist revenue, provide a lot of recreational opportunity with some outstanding fishing available and increase the sale of fishing licenses. Look at the example of the on again off again Lake Ontario fishery. When public outcry based on economic impact became loud enough, a serious health hazard suddenly became insignificant.

Yes, where we caught stripers in the Mohawk, is as I now interpret it, closed to fishing. So is a lot of the river downstream from there which is quite heavily fished with no indication of the regulation being enforced.

I therefore call on DEC to lift the ban on fishing the closed portion of the Hudson and to replace it with an advisory not to eat the fish. As they are trying to promote fishing in the Mohawk, I ask for some testing by health department people to determine which species are safe upstream from what specific landmarks

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