

ENVIRONMENTAL

In Michigan, A Fight Over the Future of a Fabled Trout River

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By James Card

The greatest sign posted at a public fishing access spot in the United States is on the South Branch of the Au Sable River at a place called the Mason Tract. It reads: "Sportsman slow your pace ... ahead lies the fabled land of the South Branch. Here generations of fisherman have cast a fly on one of the great trout streams of America. Hunters, too, have roamed these hills in the solitude so bountifully offered. The land is rich in tradition and stands ready to renew your soul. Tread lightly as you pass and leave no mark. Go forth in the spirit of George W. Mason, whose generous gift has made this forever possible."

George Mason was a Michigan industrialist who upon his death in 1954 donated 1,500 acres along the Au Sable River to the state with the caveat that it never be sold or developed. It was just as he left it: a pristine trout stream flowing 138 miles through the north country woods of the northern Lower Peninsula until it finally dumps into Lake Huron.

My car was parked in front of the sign. I leaned against the hood as I kicked off my wet waders. I had spent a couple of hours fly fishing there and it was a satisfying afternoon, one that thousands of other anglers have experienced on this river. However, there is great worry about the health of the Au Sable, and many people believe the river is threatened by, of all things, more trout.

It's in the form of a fish farm in Grayling, a nearby city. A hatchery was built there in 1914. It was operated by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources back when trout were regularly stocked in the river. When the Au Sable produced sustainable populations of wild trout, the stocking ceased and the hatchery was taken over by Crawford County, which ran it as a seasonal tourist attraction that was difficult to keep in the black.

In 2012, the county approached Dan Vogler, a fish farmer, who said he had figured out how to make it a profitable enterprise. It was a decision that would eventually polarize the community and land Mr. Vogler in court.

I drove back into Grayling. The river runs through the heart of this town. It runs past Camp Grayling, the largest National Guard training center in the country.

It flows past the elementary school, through backyards, next to downtown and eventually out into the country.

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In 1998, Mr. Warrington retired from teaching biology and chemistry at Michigan Tech and he and his wife moved to the Grayling area to be close to the Au Sable. At 76, he still fishes the river almost daily.

In the air were the blue-winged olives, mayflies no bigger than a speck of fuzz. Mr. Warrington cast his zero-weight fly rod — one of the smallest rods manufactured — toward a seam of rising trout.

His line and rod snapped tight and a small brook trout splattered the water. He brought it in and released it.

“So many people suffer from big fish-itis,” he said. “It’s that they forget what they are out there for and that is for fun.”

For the next hour, we took turns casting to the feeding trout. I lost count how many I caught, maybe five or six, and I missed plenty of others.

“You were asking about that fish farm,” Mr. Warrington said. “As you can see now there are hardly any weeds. I remember 40 years ago there were so many weeds you couldn’t even fish. If phosphorus gets into this river it will turn it into a weed bed. And without this river, Grayling wouldn’t exist.”