

REASONED PUBLIC POLICY: CANADA GETS THE LEAD OUT

By Sheldon C. Bachus

Having just returned from a Fall vacation in the Canadian Rockies, I was recently bemused by an article appearing on the front page, no less, of the San Francisco Chronicle. Written by Peter Fimrite, and titled in appropriately bold font “Anglers enraged over possible ban on lead weights, lures”, the article reported that the California Department of Toxic Substances (DTSC) is studying the environmental implications of anglers using purportedly toxic fishing tackle such as lead sinkers and lures.

Consistent with the Chronicle's reporting policy of never leaving a potential wedge issue unburnished, Fimrite began by announcing that “anglers threw down their waders in anger” over the DTSC's decision. Well, after nearly seven decades of fishing California's lakes and streams, I must respond that I have never dropped my waders in anger. Maybe for other outdoor exigencies, but certainly not for something so absurdly tendentious as the possibility that some pernicious government regulator was about to take my lead sinkers and lures from me.

I was bemused on several counts. First, along with many of my angling peers, I stopped using lead tackle – typically lead-core fly line or split-shot followed by a trailing streamer fly – many years ago. This was not in response to some great personal enlightenment on my part, but rather from the prompting of an angling friend who kindly suggested that I would do less damage to the environment if I ceased using lead split-shot to get down to the fish. Being also a duck hunter, my friend explained that he had stopped using lead shot for duck hunting because the shot pellets that missed their mark fell into the water, waterfowl ate the pellets when foraging for pebbles to help them digest their food, and then died of lead poisoning when their stomach acid dissolved the lead and it entered their bloodstream.

Be forewarned, however, that my friend and I are probably part of a very small minority in contrast to a far greater majority of California anglers who persist in using lead as a part of their arsenal of fishing tackle. However, I find it hard to believe the Chronicle's intimation -- and putting aside Will Roger's admonishment to the contrary – that this same majority of anglers will go storming up the hill with scythes and pitchforks to storm the DTSC castle should lead sinkers and lures be banned throughout the California angling fiefdom. California anglers consist of every breed of cat from fly-fishing elitists to bass boat good-ol'-boys. But what they share equally is a penchant for common sense – something unfortunately lacking or at least overlooked by the San Francisco Chronicle and its media minions.

No, if the DTSC prohibits lead fishing tackle, many California anglers may grumble a bit, but certainly not rage against the dying of the light, or even drop their waders in anger.

More likely, the manufacturers of lead fishing lures and sinkers will retool their factories to produce non-toxic alloy products, which may increase a few pennies in price, but anglers' lives will go on – just as they did after the general trout limit was decreased from 15 fish maximum of my grandparents' day to the 5 fish limit of today.



Waterton Lakes Park

Actually, there is more to this argument than simply good sense, and in this respect my recent trip to the Canadian Rockies provides ample evidence. Prior to leaving, and after much pleading on the part of my fly-rod, I agreed to let it accompany me. Although by mid-Fall a lot of the lakes and streams in the Canadian national park system are closed, I found some open water both in Waterton and Jasper

national parks. Upon reaching my first destination, Waterton, I purchased a fishing permit at the park visitor center. A friendly staff volunteer took out a map and showed me exactly which lakes and streams were still open to fishing. Although preaching to the choir, he told me that it was necessary to close some waters on September 1st because brook trout and other char spawn in the early Fall. He also advised that the use of bait and bait scent, along with lead sinkers or any form of lead tackle, was strictly prohibited. After nicely reviewing all of the important “do’s” and “don’ts” included in the park angling regulations, he was kind enough -- a trait that seems to come naturally to Canadians -- to advise me that I might pick up a fish or two at the lower end of Knight Lake. I took the 15 minute drive to the lake and began fishing the east end, just above where the Bow River begins its long journey eastward across the rolling Alberta prairie. On my second cast I hooked a large brown trout that now remains only a memory still swimming in the clear water of Knight Lake. After being hooked, the fish tolerated no more than a short five minute tug-of-war that ended with a #12 bead-head caddis nymph being thrown back in my face. An old brown’s attitude is sometimes as ugly as he looks.

Later in the trip, after journeying north to Jasper, I had a similar experience. I walked into a local tackle shop to find out what flies the fish were hitting and where the best water was that remained open to angling. The fellow working the counter mentioned that stone fly imitations were working pretty well, and that some anglers were known to put a bit of weight on to get the flies down to the fish, especially where the current was strong. Then, knowing that I was on vacation from the U.S.A, he asked if I was aware

that lead weights were prohibited, and added that he had some inexpensive legal alloy split-shot if I needed it. In light of my recent experience with the Waterton brown trout, I replied that I probably would not be fishing deep and didn't really need any additional weight. In yet another example of Canadian friendliness, he then suggested I try Medicine Lake for rainbow trout, and actually drew a little map showing how I could hike cross-country to get to the fish.

Medicine Lake was originally named by the local First People for the lake's strange penchant of losing all of its water over the short three months of the Rocky Mountain summer. Immediately after snow-melt this two-mile long natural lake is brim full to a depth of over 70 feet. But, by the first day of Fall it is completely empty and consists only of a number of pools refreshed by the Malign River. The local First People thought some sort of "bad medicine" was responsible for draining the lake, however, scientists have come to the conclusion that the fractured lakebed siphons off the water through a jumble of moraine and underground caverns. Whatever the reason for its draining, Medicine Lake has become "good medicine" for anglers, as significant numbers of large rainbow trout are stranded in the remaining pools during the Fall. To protect these fish, many of which can weigh nearly 10 pounds, the government has restricted Medicine Lake to fly-fishing and catch-and-release only angling from September 1 to the close of the season on October 31.

I saved Medicine Lake for the last fishing day of my vacation. Using the map provided by the tackle shop, and keeping a wary eye out for bears, I hiked cross-country to the river-fed pools which lay toward the back end of the lake bed. I worked the pools for several hours without a rise. Then, as the sun started to drop, a wind came up, riffled the water and a fish broke the surface of the far side of



"The Pools" – Medicine Lake

the pool. On the first two casts he rolled over my little imitation mosquito, which rode high on the surface of the water. Then, on the third cast he took the fly, went for a short run, and then jumped his own length, about 2 feet, into the air. He repeated this maneuver several times but couldn't throw the hook. After sulking a bit, maybe to contemplate a complete change of strategy, the fish started a lightning fast run down the pool, the reel drag screaming against the speed. Then, silence. As the reserve backing line on the reel was reached, the knot securing it to the fly line fouled on a line guide, the 5 pound test leader snapped and hung loose in the current with both the fly

and the rainbow trout that took it no longer present. Another memory of a magnificent Rocky Mountain trout not quite caught – which is probably the way it should be.

The reason I will have those lasting memories is that the Canadian government has established a coherent and comprehensive plan for the management and conservation of its fishery resources. Indeed, in a recent interview Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who is also the leader of his country's Conservative Party, observed that the words "conservative" and "conservation" are both formed from the same root. The Prime Minister then went on to say that this should remind us that reasoned public policy formation can in fact produce a balance between the conservation of our natural resources and the demands of economic well-being.

At the national level Canadian fisheries management has most assuredly gotten the lead out – not only from sinkers and lures but also from the inertia of the myopic angling regulations that continue to plague its neighbor to the south. As did that Medicine Lake trout to a little mosquito fly floating on the surface of his home pool, when I arrived back from my Canadian vacation, I too rose to the absurdity of yet another media-inflamed debate over a meaningless argument about how the prohibition of lead tackle will bring the California sports-fishing economy to its knees. It is time California anglers rise as well to the greater challenge, and craft a fisheries management policy that is truly comprehensive. A future article will explore how that policy might be developed and defined.