

the Atlantic



Print | Close

..... COMPLETE THE ATLANTIC USER SURVEY, AND YOU'LL BE ENTERED TO WIN AN IPAD 2! .....



# Man, Nature, and Trout: Our Vanishing Traditions

By Hank Shaw

*Tame fish—and ones that are nearly gone—remind an angler that the natural world is our home, a place to use and preserve*



The first trout hit no more than 15 minutes after we first dropped our lines into the waters of Pyramid Lake. The fish struck the lure hard; I didn't even have to set the hook. I set it anyway. It felt like a decent fish, and it was: The cutthroat was easily more than two pounds.

My guide, Joe Mendes of [Eagle Eye Charters](#), liked what he saw: "I think we'll do pretty good today." He was right. We caught 28 trout in five hours, including a nice five-pounder. It was a blissful day--the best trout fishing trip of my life.

But there's something you ought to know. I am not a trout angler. In fact, I've harbored an irrational dislike of trout for most of my life. It's really not the trout's fault: I avoid them because I don't like trout anglers. Or at least most I've yet met.

No, Mr. Trout. I am supposed to catch you and eat you. You are supposed to be a little warier about what you bite, and to struggle a little harder when you've been fooled.

The reason for my distaste is, quite simply, catch-and-release--or rather the culture of catch-and-release. Yes, I do release plenty of fish on my way to catching my legal limit, and tossing back fish of illegal size is all part of angling. But I don't think that harassing fish all day just to feel a tug on my line is such a great idea; as [Holly](#) puts it, catch-and-release is a lot like shooting ducks with a taser, just to watch them fall. I fish to eat. Period.

I realize some of you reading this might be lifelong trout anglers. A few may pursue this fish to the

exclusion of all others. Don't get me wrong. If you are a catch-and-release angler, I may not agree with you, but I respect your decision. And if you respect my decision to eat my catch, I'd be happy to fish alongside you any day. But a certain breed of trout anglers gives me the hairy eyeball if I even mention eating trout. You'd think I was talking about eating their pets or children. Sorry pal, but I refuse to be ostracized because I choose to step out of the audience and take my place on Nature's stage.

The natural world is not a museum, nor is it an amusement park. It is our home--and a home to be lived in. We forget this at our great peril. Which brings me back to the Lahontan cutthroat trout, and to the Paiutes who tend them.

As we were catching trout after trout, I noticed something odd: Most fish would hit the lure hard, I'd set the hook and reel--but after a moment or two, they would seem to give up and swim toward the boat. An ocean fish would never do this. I asked Joe's mate, known to one and all as Old John, what was going on. "Most of these fish have been caught a lot," he said. And, as if on cue, 20 minutes later I landed a trout with a little barbless trout fly stuck in its mouth. John gently pried it out before releasing the fish, which was too large to fit in the 17- to 20-inch slot limit and too small to count as my "trophy" keeper.

That fish--the five-pounder--came later. Here's Old John with it.



These fish seemed resigned to the drill. That it was part of their fate to be caught and released any number of times during their lives. I swear I could almost see a look of shock in the fish's eyes as I put him in the cooler. *What? This is not how it is supposed to end! You're supposed to let me free!*

No, Mr. Trout. I am supposed to catch you and eat you. You are supposed to be a little warier about what you bite, and to struggle a little harder when you've been fooled. Lesson learned. These fish are glorious trout, fat, healthy, and among the finest eating in the world. But most have lost their native ferocity. Sad.



The trout's misfortune goes far deeper than their strange and stressful dance with human anglers. The real tragedy of Pyramid Lake's Lahontan cutthroat trout is that they have lost their home. Without the aid of the Paiute tribe, they would vanish.

A century ago this was not the case. The trout would spend most of their days in Pyramid Lake, then run up the Truckee River to spawn, some as far and as high as Lake Tahoe. But in 1905 the federal Bureau of Reclamation dammed the Truckee, and almost overnight the lake's water level dropped an astonishing 80 feet. Foreign invaders hit the trout harder. Imported German brown trout and Eastern rainbow trout began to tighten their grip on the Truckee, and soon the cutthroats were on the edge of extinction, trapped in their alkaline, salty lake with nowhere to spawn.



It was only in the 1970s, when the Paiutes built a lakeside hatchery, that the Lahontans began to recover. Still, most Lahontan trout in Pyramid are not actually Pyramid Lake Lahontan trout, they are a strain of cutthroats from nearby Summit Lake, which will never grow to the size of the original fish. Another group of trout in the lake are cutbows, a hybrid of the Lahontan and rainbow that are excellent eating; my five-pounder was a cutbow.

It was only very recently that biologists found the original Pyramid trout--in a stream near Pilot Peak, Utah. Someone, at some unknown point, planted them there. They've been returned to Pyramid Lake, and hopes are high that anglers will someday catch another 40-pound Goliath.

But without the hatcheries, none of these fish would be in the lake. And being born in a bucket after your mother and father swam up a 500-foot concrete causeway instead of the Truckee River has confused the trout, which are genetically programmed to return to the "river" of their birth. Now untold thousands run up this causeway to spawn.

Nevada Fish & Wildlife measures and tags the fish, and the Paiute hatchery workers take some spawning fish, "milk" the eggs and sperm from them, mix it in a bucket and raise the little trout for a few months, until they're about four inches long.



On the plus side, the lake population of trout is robust, and the fishing is exceptional for one of the world's largest trout--the record for the original Pyramid Lake strain of the Lahontans is 41 pounds, and even today fish over 10 pounds are common. Mendes says 40-fish days happen all the time. But no one has yet figured out how to get these trout to spawn on their own, up the Truckee or anywhere else. It leaves an otherwise heartwarming success story in a sad state of limbo. They have lost their way.

To some, it is the same with the Paiutes who take care of the trout.

Pyramid Lake is one of the few Native American reservations in America where the tribe got to keep its ancestral land. The Cui-ui Band of Paiutes (most Paiute bands are named for their primary food, in this case a type of large sucker fish) have been living off the land around the lake for close to 10 millennia, until shortly after John Fremont showed up in 1844. Within 30 years the Paiutes were locked into their current reservation. Cut off from traditional hunting and foraging grounds, they could no longer support their own population in the old way. So, like us, the Paiutes began drinking Coke and eating McDonald's.

I didn't come to the reservation just to catch trout. I also wanted to learn more about the edible plants of this place, plants that were once important to the Paiutes. My fishing guide, Joe, introduced me to Ralph Burns, one of the curators of the tribal museum on the reservation. Burns is one of the few people remaining who know about the tribe's traditional foodways.

The [cui-ui](#), a sucker that can reach six pounds, was the tribe's main food. The fish ran in vast numbers up the Truckee River in late spring. The Paiutes would gather and set up fish houses for the harvest, then spear or net hundreds and dry them in the valley's parching breezes. Now the fish is endangered, and all that is left of the fish houses are rotting foundations overgrown with sage.

This band of Paiutes calls themselves Cui Ui Ticutta, or Those Who Eat the Sucker Fish. Ralph's bitter joke is that his grandchildren's generation should instead be called McDonald's Ticutta.

Trout were more challenging to catch, Burns said, but they were still caught in great numbers; they gave some to Fremont when he arrived in 1844. Young men also would paddle out to one of the lake's

many islands to collect the eggs of the white pelican, which are still everywhere around the lake. There was game in the hills, and that game is still there--Burns said he knows lots of people who hunt on the reservation every fall.

But he knows of few who still gather the valley's wild plants.

Burns spoke of a nearby canyon full of what he called desert parsley, but which I think is actually yampa root, based off the dried tubers he had in the museum. Yampa is one of the finest-tasting wild tubers in North America, and here was a valley full of the plant, ignored by the people who once relied on it.

Likewise for the buckberries in the valley, which Burns and I think are called buffalo berries (*Shepherdia argentea*) elsewhere. He spoke of desert peach (*Prunus andersonii*) and elderberries and bitterroot and wild onions. Burns did not mention sego lily (*Calochortus nuttallii*), but it must have slipped his mind--I saw it everywhere on the range. None of these are gathered by more than a few elders anymore, he said.

But the ancient lore has not totally been lost. Many Paiutes still head into the hills to gather piñon pine nuts every September; they are to the Paiutes what blackberries are to those of us who live on the Pacific Coast. It is the one wild edible still immediately recognized and widely gathered by a population largely torn from its connection to the earth.

Call me sentimental, but there seems to be something extraordinarily tragic about a people who have lived on the same stretch of land since the last Ice Age losing their links to that land. This band of Paiutes calls themselves Cui Ui Ticutta, or Those Who Eat the Sucker Fish. Ralph's bitter joke is that his grandchildren's generation should instead be called McDonald's Ticutta.

It is Burns's hope, and mine, that this pendulum will swing. For my part, I intend to celebrate those foods that are lost, to help restore them to their rightful place as beacons of regional abundance that make each piece of this great land what it is. Piñon pine nuts and the Lahontan cutthroat trout are two of the greatest foods North America has to offer. I will eat them both with great gusto, and think about the river of life that binds us all.

*Images: Hank Shaw*

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2011/04/man-nature-and-trout-our-vanishing-traditions/237139/>

Copyright © 2011 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.