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Matt Kulp [00:00:10] So my role here's a fishery biologist. And so my job is to. Take care, to protect and preserve the rivers and streams and the things that live in 'em in this National Park. There's about twenty nine hundred miles of streams in the park. And so it's a pretty daunting task. And you're looking at 530,000 acres. What we specifically do is a lot of work to monitor the populations to make sure that they're, they're doing well and that there's no intrinsic or threats from humans you could say affecting these populations that we need to deal with. And also then to restore native fish populations where we can too that's a huge part of the National Parks Services. Otherwise we just protect and observe what's there. And. That's as best we can while people fish for them. In some cases but here it's not too bad. We have a fairly extensive trail system that people can use in and around the park. There's not places that people love it to death here like maybe some other places around the service Park Service. Most of our fishing opportunities are non-native fisheries anyway. And. The mindset of people over time has switched really to a catch and release mentality and so. The impacts for our fisheries are pretty minimal even with parks in those places. People pretty much police themselves. I think what makes fishing in the smoky special it's one of the few places yet in the east United States that you can come and fish true, wild trout populations. Unimpaired for the most part. We do have some impairment for massive rain, but in terms of just getting away and getting off trail, getting to some places that very few people go to, you still have those opportunities here in the smokies. And also to fish for wild fish in their native environment. There's a lot of hatchery supported fisheries across our country. In this case, this is all wild, natural reducing populations, so. If you want to match your wits with a truly wild species, especially a native species. Thousand wild streams. Well. We have over 60 species of fish present here in the park. But in terms of trout. Yeah just the native southern Appalachian brook trout or native.

James Thull [00:02:44] And then you guys have browns and rainbows. I'm guessing too?

Matt Kulp [00:02:48] We do. We have both brown and rainbow trout in the park.

Matt Kulp [00:02:56] So I think this is a great question. Because I think the native versus wild is something anglers mix up a lot. And I think it's a very very important distinction. In my opinion, a native fish is one that basically evolved or one that God put there, so to speak. And so in this area that the native somewhat or trout species are, are brook trout. You move up in the northeast you get into Atlantic salmon as well as brook trout. The flip side of that is wild fish. In my opinion are fish that have been established somewhere and are naturally reproducing. So they're producing their own wild offspring. Those fish grow up, produce their own wild offspring. That's a considered a wild fishery. Two different things. We actually have both. We have native trout in the park. Brook trout that live here they're wild. And we also wild brown and rainbow trout fisheries and so. They both have a place here. In the Smokies. This is another clear distinction that. A lot of the public think that we're here to eradicate all the rainbow Brown trout in the park and just make this a native trout fishery. And that's not true. We're here to establish brook trout where we can. Where they meet certain criteria. And then. Everything else is gonna stay the way it is. Those rainbow and brown trout fisheries are very popular as well and people enjoy them. They're not going anywhere. So we don't have a silver bullet to take out all the non-native fish and just put the natives back. So. Till that day comes. This is going to be a mixed wild trout fishery of rainbow brook brown trout. You know.

Matt Kulp [00:04:34] I'm probably like a lot of people when you look at what gets people to fish. And it's usually someone close to them a family member. Some of them took them in early age and that's the same for me. I had a grandfather that. Took me fishing as well as my father huge influences. My grandfather in particular didn't have a lot. He worked a route filling vending machines but he would take all eight or nine grandkids that he could fit in his old Chevy pickup with a bag of apples and some Cokes. And whatever was out of date crackers and take us to a local stream to fish in those times and the times my dad fishing are really what just kind of grew that and engrained that love of fishing in me. It wasn't necessarily what you caught but it was that time outdoors spending with people you love. So. I think that is really the key. And it's a key for organizations to think about too. That first little seed that they plant with somebody, getting them out. To go so follow. That's what's exciting for me.

Matt Kulp [00:05:45] I would say to a new angler is. Not to get hung up too much on what kind of gear you got. Not to get hung up on how big a fish is how many. It's just to get out there and enjoy it. Just to. The challenge of learning you know, how to catch fish. And. You're. Dealing with somebody that maybe knows what they're doing and can show you. But. There's a lot more to fishing than just the experience of catching that fish. That time away just getting out. There's so many other things that you see. And so. Same thing with a lot of other sports that are outdoor sports. It's that time away to clear your mind and look at God's creation I think is what's just a great opportunity for all of us. And something to think about when you go fishing, for sure.

Matt Kulp [00:06:35] Well that's a great question for me. I can tell you both what I mean. What makes a good partner and what I think makes a bad one. First I'll start with the bad. I like people that are very competitive. People that want to outdo you whether it's by size or how many they caught. Or you know splitting up the catch That's not for me. But I like to go with people that are out there to enjoy it as well. They're as happy seeing you catch a fish as you are catching one. They like to take the opportunity to show you things, you know teach you things that they've learned over time and vice versa that you teach them. Just someone fun to be around. That's always makes a great fishing partner.

Matt Kulp [00:07:21] I think probably one of the biggest threats I see that we're, we're everyone's dealing with now is these quite invasives. That's a huge threat. And they're not going to stop. What with our global world now. The way things move so fast, back and forth. Whether it's ditty Mo. New Zealand blood snail. There's always gonna be something else nowadays and unfortunately. We're going to have to train ourselves as anglers to clean our gear. Just be aware of that. Because there's always going to be another one. And. It's just going to have to be as, as as much a habit of ours as it is to go put our waders in the car. And as far as habitat, I think the biggest one is, is development. I think. A lot of the groups that are out there to protect and preserve cold water habitat are right on the mark. To try to not only protect it but then to foster a sense of understanding the angling community that's how important that is, to save these places. If you can do that, people will want the next generation to want to preserve them as well. If you don't, they may not.

Matt Kulp [00:08:39] I think groups like Trout Unlimited, Federation of Fly Fishers, all that stuff, they play a huge role. And. They do some excellent work. Couple of things that they do that I really admire and I think they're on the right track is one is uh, promoting volunteer experiences. Not just raising funds but more so getting people out to experience these places. Get them out in the the field helping biologists like us. To see the resources and then get hands on what they're doing not just in, in working with fish but even in this

case working on parks collecting water, helping collect data that'll help protect that park for a long time. That's very very important. Puts a connection there. With the resource and that group. And it builds a foundation of something that they can pass on to their next generation of supporters. The other thing I see these groups doing that I think is really important is fostering that same thing in the next generation. Through programs like trout in the classroom, through uh support internships for young people to get into the field. Those things are really important to again foster that next generation and promote an understanding. I think their biggest challenge is going down the pike is. What I see is a lot of. It. It's a changing group of anglers over time. Getting away from harvest and sport. More so in this time of family and friends which is great. But also see that is. The anglers or chiefs. I don't see. As many of the hardcore, backcountry, let's walk five miles in to fish anglers as. I see the. Folks who just came out of the fly shop with all the brand new gear. That don't get but just a half mile from their truck. I don't know how to change that other than to promote these opportunities that we have and hope people take advantage of them. That's something we don't want to lose.

Matt Kulp [00:10:43] You know I think there's a perception that they're different. But once again one of the things I promote when we go and speak with anglers is just remember you're all fishermen. Yeah. And. I think sometimes people get really hung up on delineating themselves, separating themselves rather than remembering what they have in common. I think that leads to problems and people need to recognize that those warm dunkers anonymous if they ever form. Would. Outnumber all of us. So. It's important to recognize those folks that they have an equal place. They paid for license just like we do. And that we need them. And we were all there once too no matter where you're at in the continuum of fishing in your life. Everyone needs each other in terms of fishing. And so don't discredit folks. I think too people need to be united in their fishing opportunities and leave room for everybody, so to speak. Well. I think one thing I've seen us gain is an appreciation for handicapped anglers. There's certainly a lot more recognition of fishing piers and. Structures and streams that let people experiences it that couldn't before. There's new programs for wounded warriors and such to get people out that are, otherwise would have a difficult time angling. I think we've gained a lot of science knowledge over time. That. I think. Trout Unlimited and other groups have some of their own staff. But they're, they're, they're fostering and forwarding some of these initiatives that are out there to try to protect these things. Not just the short term but the long term which I think is great. I think what we lost is as I mentioned before I think that sense of. Adventure so to speak. I think it's something that we need to grab ahold of, hold on to. That. It's no different the Smokies is probably out west that. The fishing gets exponentially better the farther you are from a trailhead because most people don't walk more than a mile from the trailhead. When you can walk five six eight miles back and still experience some great fishing, those fish don't see many flies bobbing in the water. And I think that changes anglers' perspectives too. The angler that goes half a mile and only catches a few fish. They see that as that's fishing. Whereas if they'd gone just a mile and a half, they would have a totally different experience. And so I think, I don't know how we can promote that other than telling people what's out there. I hope we don't lose that over time, that sense of adventure in fishing.

James Thull [00:13:27] Do you think that comes with with time too? I mean like the longer you're fishing that you get that urge that you want to hike back and catch one of those goldens. It's only a 10 mile hike in or?

Matt Kulp [00:13:39] I think you're right. I think. Hopefully over time people. You know. Develop those curiosities and that sense of adventure. But. It just seems like the anglers of

today. My generation and others are just much different than those. 40 50 years ago. Sure. And why they were there is much different. But. I just hope we don't lose that. That. Sense of these wild places because they are beautiful places like I said.

Matt Kulp [00:14:13] You know. That that's a great question. That's probably the one I thought most about. And. You know. I think. Certainly brook trout have a favorite place in my heart because I worked with them a lot but the resiliency and the fact that they've been here for such a long time. And really the amount of things they've gone through perturbations as we call through logging and introduction of non natives and low genetic robustness in terms of being bottlenecked so many times, these little headwaters. And they persist. That to me said something. They're fighters. And there's something about that that intrigues me. Bull trout is another one that I think will work with the Western parks. I like the fact that they have their life history. Some of them are sea run. Some of them are endemic to freshwater systems. The size they get, their aggressiveness. There's something about that too that as a guy you just say that's a cool fish. But. Those two would be two of my favorites.

Matt Kulp [00:15:15] No. I think. If I could just I guess, from an angling perspective. Just to summarize I think the question you asked earlier about the differences in anglers I think. There's one point I can make to anglers would be just recognize that every one of you shares a love of fishing. And. Don't ever forget that. Sometimes again we get hung up on whose piece of the river this is. And what regulation we should have here there. You know. In the big picture, you know, in 20-30 years now a lot of people think about. How important it was. That. It's more important I think to get people out. To garner an appreciation of that resource. Center squabble both. That kind of stuff sometimes.