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Fred Nelson [00:00:13] When I was a young kid, I grew up on Long Island, right adjacent to New York City. And for some reason, I really can't tell, I got this fishing book. And initially, we fished the bay for snapper blues, and flounders, you know, bait fishing. But, I got a hold of Field & Stream magazine, and Outdoor Life. Al McClane was fishing editor for Field & Stream, and Joe Brooks was, and for some reason, I got hooked on fly fishing. Trout fishing. Even though the area I lived with, in uh, there was very limited trout fishing opportunities. And I grew up in a fairly poor environment, so I didn't have anybody there to take me fishing, or even care about fishing. And I developed this bug. And it's always been like that. Fishing, to me, has been a way of life. It's really has. I mean, we're- I was talking my friend the other day, and he's- he's about as avid as I am, and he was saying "You know, if I couldn't go fishing, I don't know what I'd do." Same thing with me. Everything I do recreationally is, is involved with fly fishing. You know, fly tying, traveling, that type of thing. So fishing has, has been basically what I do.

Fred Nelson [00:01:55] On my own. You know, my, my brother and I, on spring break, we used to go up to the Catskill Mountains. We could take the trailways bus up there. And we'd camp out for the two weeks, and we'd fish the Beaverkill River. And, you know, that's, that's the things we did, we made the best of what we had, you know and uh, even in where I grew up in Long Island, at one time, Suffolk County, on eastern Long Island was very rural, it was basically a farm area. And they had some tre- some great lakes, and some spring fed rivers. The Nessaqua, the Carmen's river, the Conaquat. These were spring fed rivers, not more than 10 miles long, and they held, you know trout, native brook trout. I remember catching native brook trout on Long Island. You know, they were, they were four or five inches long, but they were native. And some of those waters now, don't exist. They're, they're drainage ditches, now. And, uh, we had sea run brown trout, in some of those. I can remember when I was working on Long Island, Long Island, stopping off on the Sunrise Highway, and um, a little tributary called the Rattlesnake Brook. We'd stop and look into it, and invariably, we'd see these giant sea run browns in there. And I tried to catch them, but never, never could. Um, but, uh, you know, there were, there was opportunities there, and I took advantage of it.

Fred Nelson [00:03:35] Well, yeah. It's part of the challenge, you know, it's part of the fun of, of fishing. And it always is. You know, like brook trout. I go back east, and I was visiting my brother in Bucks County, and I read an article about a stream there that, one stream in Bucks County still has native brook trout. It had a big article about it, and the things that we're doing to protect that fish. And I was just, you know, in awe about that, you know? Here we are 50 miles north of Philadelphia, and there's actually a stream there that has native brook trout. Now out here, brook trout are elusive species. Up at Hyalite reservoir, Hyalite reservoir is becoming a brook trout fishery. Every time I go up there, I catch more and more brook trout. And you know, 40, 50 years ago, they weren't there, never caught one. So you know, changed but, but you know brook trout in Montana is not much of anything. But back east, they're really magnificent fish.

Fred Nelson [00:04:47] Well, yeah, actually mountains. You know, I was always in awe of mountains, and forests, and wildlife, and things like that. And that's where you found, you found the trout streams. Was in, was in the mountains. And, you know, back in New York, we had, we had mountains, we had the Ramapo Mountains up, uh, just north of the city. The Catskill Mountains, and then, you know, later in the, when I was older, we would go up to the Adirondacks. And they- to me they were real wilderness areas, and then some of them are still, still like that. Even though there's been lots of change. But, yeah, I think the

mountain environment, that's what really drew me to the trout streams. Drew me to Montana.

Fred Nelson [00:05:42] I was in the Army for five years and, and I always wanted to go to Yellowstone Park. In the, you know, and things were going well, and I said you know what, I, when I get out, I just got to do what I want to do in life. And I wanted to go to Yellowstone Park. I wanted to come to Montana. And that's what I did. I came out here one summer, I was on a 30 day leave. And I just came to Montana, I stayed in West Yellowstone. And then I stayed on the Boulder River. And spent a month out here and fell in love with the place, and I applied to Montana State for graduate school, and I went through, through their graduate program in Fish and Wildlife Management.

James Thull [00:06:28] About what year would've that been?

Fred Nelson [00:06:30] That was uh 1970... '72, I came here. And... somewhere around '73, somewhere like, in there, I started at MSU, yep.

Fred Nelson [00:06:48] No, that's why I was in it for five years, I, I, I was originally, I was going to scout dog school. And when I, when I got to scout dog school I- all the instructors there were crippled, and they weren't looking like they had a fun time in Vietnam, and basically, it was highly dangerous job, so I reenlisted, and got into the medical field.

James Thull [00:07:17] I didn't know whether you had been stationed in Germany or anything like that, I've met-.

Fred Nelson [00:07:21] No, no, I was stationed overseas in Alabama.

Fred Nelson [00:07:29] Well, basically, the one thing that's really obvious is the number of people, you know. Places I used to fish and, you know, I was the only one there, at times. And now, that's not the case, you know, it's been- Montana has been discovered. And so there's really a social problems right now, conflicts. To me, to enjoy a fishing experience is being the only one there, or be able to get away from the crowd is, is part of the experience. And a lot of places you can't do that anymore.

James Thull [00:08:04] Is that- I know from other talks that we've had, that you fish mainly lakes now and...?

Fred Nelson [00:08:09] Yeah, I just can't fish rivers anymore. And, I remember going down the Madison River during a salmon fly hatch one year, and we, we started off and there was 8 drift boats completely around us, and I was floating my raft with some friends. And the entire trip there was eight boats, surrounded. And it really destroyed the experience, and it- catching fish wasn't important, it was just being there, surrounded by all these people. And for some reason that, that was unacceptable, and I basically quit fishing on rivers. And I do fish on occasion, and go out with my friends, but I row, they fish. I can't say I've ever fished a river in the last, oh I don't know, 10, 12 years. Around here.

Fred Nelson [00:09:03] Well I, I started, basically, the major work I did was, I did in stream flow work. Montana had a, had a water adjudication program, where we had to refile our claims on water. And Fish, Wildlife and Parks holds in stream water rights on, on our blue ribbon waters. And so we had, I had to refile those, and document how much water we needed, to maintain those fisheries. And that was a part of the water adjudication. And we've also put claims in on a whole series of other things. Our irrigation rights, for our

game management areas, you know, some are recreation areas, we have water rights that, that are for irrigation, and the water supply, for people. Stock watering too, in places that, you know, some of our game ranges. We have horses and stuff. And then, we went through the water reservation process. Where, legislature allowed us to claim water for future use, on all our rivers. For Fish and Wildlife purposes. And I kind of was in charge of getting that, the applications together. I, along with Lighter Spence, another department employee. And we put together that program, and made our claims, and went through the court process. And we ended up getting protection on 300 and some water courses in Montana, as I recall. That was for the upper Missouri River basin. And then previously, it was done for the Yellowstone basin, and I didn't have any input into that, other than that the legislature required us to do certain things. What measure engages, and stuff like that. And I work with that. And we also did the lower Missouri basin. And I think, the, as I recall we had a primary date of 1992, for our water reservation. In our, in our Murphy right streams, which are the streams that, the blue ribbon streams, where we have actually water rights, there's like 1970s. But, you know what it's protection for our water courses, but the priority dates, essentially, are so late, they don't do much. Except on those streams that haven't been over appropriated, that they do, they do protect that water.

Fred Nelson [00:11:53] Again we have our, our, our water rights and we have our water reservations and they are enforced. I mean when new users come on board they have to understand that we have the senior water use and that amount has to stay in the water, stay in the stream.

James Thull [00:12:11] By we you mean the state?

Fred Nelson [00:12:11] State, the state of Montana, yeah. The Fish Wildlife and Parks was given, as the representative of the public under the law. And so they, they do enforce that. And there's water leasing now where we can actually lease water from private enterprise and keep it in stream. But a number of streams, when I was working we- I think we had about 12 or 16 leases on some really important water courses like uh, there's a, there's a stream over there in the Yellowstone, and I can't think of the name of it. But anyway it went dry. And it was a cutthroat spawning stream.

James Thull [00:13:05] Like Mill Creek or something?

Fred Nelson [00:13:06] Nah, it was across from Mill Creek, it was... I just can't remember.

James Thull [00:13:10] That's okay.

Fred Nelson [00:13:10] Yeah. And we worked out a lease with some of the ranchers there and now it has water year round, it doesn't go dry and it's producing cutthroat trout. It's a major spawning tributary. It always has been but, fish would go up there and stream would dry up. And there was never much reproduction coming out of it. Now it's just reverse. And so, you know there's, there's programs there, but overall agriculture still is the dominant force out there. On the Gallatin River, the rights go back, the water rights for agriculture, go back to like probably 1865. And unless you have a water right after something like 1890 you're not going to get any water. Water's pretty limited, it's those early rights who control it, and it's very hard to do anything on the Gallatin River. Simply because we have a water reservation. We have a Murphy right but the priority date is so late it's essentially meaningf- uh doesn't have any meaning.

Fred Nelson [00:14:29] Well I think it's, it's protecting our big river systems. Like the Madison River and the Gallatin River and such. If you go to other states like Colorado, Wyoming they don't have that, that high watermark law, the stream access law that we have, and so it's really impacted recreation on big water courses. And here, you know the Madison River is open to angling. You know I mean there's, there's no, no... the challenges to that continue, but the local challenges for example, on the Madison River have ended. And there has been people who filed lawsuit claiming that people didn't have a right to be there, and that they basically lost. And those rivers remain open. Small streams, it's really never been a problem. We do have access, high water mark to even small streams. You know perennial streams that carry water year round. Public has access to it, but very few people utilize that, that access. You know and there's- there really is no problem with, with people having problems, you know, on their small streams. But the main, main rivers that was, that's the biggest help there because other states- major rivers, you can't get access to.

James Thull [00:16:03] Yeah, I believe it is in Wyoming, you can't even put an anchor down.

Fred Nelson [00:16:05] I know, I mean if you touch a rock where you're floating down you're trespassing or something, you know what I mean? And we don't have to deal with that. Which provides people the opportunity to go floating in our rivers, to fish our rivers. Regardless of what the, who the landowner is.

Fred Nelson [00:16:31] I think the refuge issue is extremely important. You know just locally over the years what I've seen you know, lands being gobbled up for housing developments and private people have you know, have purchased a lot of properties, out of state people. And that's not going to be around forever. And you know the native species need a refuge. And the parks provide those refuges. And provide the management that's needed to deal with them. You know, like in Yellowstone Park and the Yellowstone cutthroat trout, and the lake trout introduction there. Well, they put millions of dollars into controlling that, and to try to preserve that, that, that fishery. And states can't do that. You know we- look at Canyon Ferry reservoir. Canyon Ferry reservoir, you know I just fished it yesterday and I bank fish, and we catch rainbows this time of year you know some nice fish, but also catch walleye now, I caught, caught a walleye the other day. Now there's northern pike, walleye and, and small mouth bass, large mouth bass in Canyon Ferry, which at one time was a premier trout fishery in the state. State can't do anything to control it, you know, and it's basically over. The brown trout in Canyon Ferry reservoir now. It's all catch and release. They've totally disappeared from the, from the system. Can't find them anymore. Years ago, we used to the fish the Missouri River over, below tossed in there and catch big brown's in the fall fishing streamers and, and shooting heads. You know that was the thing we did, now? You can't find them. So the change that's occurred, and the state can't control it. So we, we have to rely on these refuge systems and, and federal resources to protect it.

Fred Nelson [00:18:49] Well I know climate change is going to be an issue. It's an issue now. Disease introduction, and we have, we have whirling disease came to Montana. We got, we got the snail problem now, coming in, showing up. I know, I know there was a little Darlington ditch over in the Madison, there was a, there's a New Zealand mud snail got in there. And I mean this is coming, and it's going to affect our fisheries just like bucket biologists is going to affect them, you know. That's why we have you know northern pike and walleye in the Canyon Ferry now. And that's going to spread, you know once you get that, that, that source there, people are going to move them elsewhere. And you know I

just look at the future and I'm saying to myself well I'm glad I had the experience, the opportunity to enjoy the good years because there aren't going to be any more good years left, the way things are going right now. It's- you know I'm not optimistic that we're going to be able to maintain these high quality trout fisheries into the future. Because of the myriad of problems that have occurred.

Fred Nelson [00:20:16] You know I've seen things in the... the east, like acid rain. You know it's destroyed so many trout fisheries in the east, and in the Adirondack Mountains, and even into eastern Canada. You know, I've seen things like that that could be related to climate change.

James Thull [00:20:44] I did, like- when I was growing up in Wisconsin we used to trick or treat in the snow almost every year. And now we're lucky if we get a white Christmas. It just seems to me like things are changing.

Fred Nelson [00:20:54] Oh yeah, it's changing here, I mean we, we talk about the weather. How our winters don't seem to be as severe, you know, we don't get those 40 degree below zero. You know we got the, got the pine beetles. You know that apparently the, the warmer winters are allowing them to expand and to produce. And we got, you know, if you go out in the forest there's a lot of areas that are just dead trees. I mean everywhere, you go up to Homestake Pass. It's all you see are dead trees up there, and that's pine beetle. You know, so you know there's things happening you know with with bears and their food source, you know. There's, there's all kinds of things happening. But you're not going to be able to stop them. What do they say, we start right now. Right now for try to control climate, you know it's not going to work, not going to happen.

Fred Nelson [00:22:01] Yeah, you know the politics nowadays it's got so frustrating to me. I'm just, I just say to myself, well listen, I'm not alone going to change it, you know, I can give money to all these groups which I do, but my- you know, I've reached the age where I'm not gonna be around forever. And my philosophy is I'm just going to go out and enjoy what I can now. And the change is going to happen. And as I said before, I think I enjoyed the good years here. And you know I'm satisfied, and when I, when I do leave this earth, I'm going to leave it happy, you know. Right now it's really hard to be happy when you look at, see what's going on. You know the worldwide actually, yeah.

Fred Nelson [00:23:02] I think you know that you've got to have something, you know. But the question is how much pull they really have. I mean how- how good can they influence what's going on right now? And, you know I look at this this current administration, even in this state, you know, look at our legislature. And it seems to me that it's just an uphill battle to get the littlest thing, you know. There's nothing major going to happen. Nothing. Nothing is going to change dramatically that you can say okay, we've going over the hump you know, we're gonna, gonna get better now, but it doesn't seem like that's going to happen. I think, I think Montana is being populated by lots of people who don't have any concern about the future. They don't have any realization that things are changing, you know. To them, people coming now think well this is the greatest place in the world but they'd have no experience of what it was like 40 years ago. You know, and- it's you know, I look at things like, like the Madison River. Oh, the Madison River they talk about how great the fishing is, you know it's recovered. But if you go back 40 years ago, when it first went to catch and release, the fishing was far better than it is now. With the, the period of time that they have to look at is so short. They don't realize that change has been traumatic. You know, what's good, what's good now, back then wasn't good.

James Thull [00:24:48] Yeah. It's all about moving that baseline, right?

Fred Nelson [00:24:50] Yeah right, right, right. It's, it's, it's exactly right, the baseline line is shifting constantly and we just don't- we're not aware of it.

Fred Nelson [00:25:06] To me it was just fun. You know, I could look at my journals and go back, you know 10 years ago, and see what I caught or how I went fishing in a particular day. And I'm going again say, tomorrow and I look back and see, you know 15 years ago and get a feeling for what went on then. You know I've done that a lot is, simply looking back at the old entries and seeing what happened. And seeing what's going to happen again. And there's a lot of information there that I collected. For example I- on Wade Lake, you know, get back 12 years ago and I kept really good records and I, I mea- had to measure that, I measured all fish and I recorded it. And you know, 12 years ago, the fish in Wade Lake averaged 14 and 1/2 inches. And over the years this average size has increased. Now the average fish I catch there is 17 inches. And you can see, in the 12 years, every year it would go up a little bit, the average size. And it fascinated me because I just wondered why that happened. You know? And I still don't know for sure. I was, I was up at Elk Lake this year, and 2014 when we went up at the same time period, the fish I caught averaged 17 and 1/2 inches. They were westslope cutthroats. And they were, they were nice big fish, nice average size. This year, I got out the same time they averaged 14 and a half inches. Three inch difference. And so I called up, and I wanted to find out why that happened and I got an answer.

James Thull [00:27:03] What was your answer?

Fred Nelson [00:27:04] They, they were screwing around with stocking rates up there and they, they think they put too many fish in.

James Thull [00:27:13] And the more fish in a given body water, the smaller they grow-

Fred Nelson [00:27:18] Smaller they grow, yeah they- right. They're all trying to eat the same food source and they're competing, yeah.

Fred Nelson [00:27:29] When I look at it simply as, as knowing what the past was like. Knowing, knowing what we lost, or what we've gained. I think that's really important. And fishermen basically are notoriously bad. In terms of recognizing size of fish they catch, how many they caught, how the fishing was. You know, and I go back to some of the work that was done in the Madison River, back in the early days. One thing we did with population estimates in a section of the river, and there was essentially 50 trout in there, in that section there were 50, that were 18 inches and lar- and larger. Well they did a creel and they asked fishermen about what, what, what they caught and everything like that. And then they, they, they claimed to have caught like over 500 fish out of that section, that were 18 inches and longer. You know 10 times I mean that they were actually there. And so it just gives you a handle on current thinking about what they're catching, what the size are, and everything. But you're going to have some kind of record there that- to go back and show exactly what happened. What's going on. Some really scientific data. And it doesn't have to be heavy science. It can be a fishing log, which someone actually measures fish. Whirling disease came on, and how'd the state find out about whirling disease? Because somebody out there fishing, who kept actual good records. If fished up and slide in for many years and kept great records and they noticed there weren't as many fish anymore. They noticed the numbers of fish had really dropped off. And they came to Fish, Wildlife and Parks with that information. It took a little while, but that's what

happened. That was the first indication that whirling disease had infected the Madison River. You know and you need that stuff.

Fred Nelson [00:29:53] I think, to me, I mean and again I am extremely avid fisherman. And I like to go fishing with the people who are as avid as I am you know. I remember a friend of mine came out with a friend of his to fish, and we were out on the Gallatin River fishing and this, this guy he was, he was a good fisherman too and he really enjoyed it. But come mid afternoon he had to take a coffee break. We had to go off the stream and go to some cafe and get the coffee and a snack and stuff, and then we'd go back fishing. And for some reason that really bothered me, you know. You. know so, you know I, I'd like somebody who was as avid as I am, and really wants to be out there, and likes to explore and catch fish if they can. And again, catching fish is not why I'm out there, I'm out there to be on the stream, see the mountains, see the wildlife. And basically enjoy myself here.

Fred Nelson [00:31:05] You know, I- these past years, the last 10, 12 years I've been into this, stillwater fishing. I really learned how to fish lakes. You know I've really put a lot of effort into it. And there's Brian Chan in British Columbia, and Phil Rolly who have really brought stillwater fishing, really brought it out to the public right now. You know, years ago, and still a lot here in Montana, you know people go still water fishing and they they trawl a woolly wor- er troll a woolly worm, or a woolly bugger behind the boat and that's stillwater fishing. Well these guys have brought it to a much higher level. Of really, really angling art, in my opinion. So I really enjoy the things that they do, they put out. And I always, even occasion when I was a kid I saved Al McClain, who is a fishing editor of Field & Stream and he put- he did a lot of articles on fly fishing and I saved them. And to this day I still have them, you know. And these things are probably 60 years old now, if not more. Faded paper and such, but I still have these articles and I still look at them on occasion.

Fred Nelson [00:32:37] I fished a lot... steelhead fishing was a passion of mine for, I think 26 years, I went every year to British Columbia. Spent anywhere from like two to five weeks there fishing. And so I've fished throughout British Columbia for steelhead, and then in later years I got into lake fishing in British Columbia, and I spent a lot of time lake fishing there. And uh... Canada, I've gone a number times pike fishing, with trips with friends of mine. I really wasn't into the fishing as much as I was in seeing the country and being with friends of mine. And I've been there a number of times, into Ontario. And I've been trout fishing or salmon fishing in Eastern Canada in the Miramachi River and the Margory. Been into northern Canada on the Arctic Ocean, fishing for sea run brook trout, and arctic char and native brook trout. And it's mostly confined to Canada. And places in the States I fished; I fished quite a bit in Washington, we still have an annual trip to the Skagit river to fish for steelhead in April. It was a, it was a catch and release fly season. And that- that ended many many years ago, when steelhead didn't show up anymore. They had to close the season. And that was a fun part, you know the, the Skagit River is a beautiful river, comes out of the North Cascades. And its tributary is the Sock. We had great times there. But it's gone, it's history.

Fred Nelson [00:34:49] Well, in terms of the future, I look at the management of our lakes and reservoirs and basically, what's done is throw a bunch of fish in them and let anglers catch them and go home, you know. I think we've reached the stage right now we're going to have to have special management on our lakes and reservoirs to preserve the quality of these fisheries. And I've seen, you know, changes already occurring. They're just, they're being overfished. And there just isn't any thought about managing. The rivers take up all the effort, and the lakes and reservoirs are kind of secondary. And you know they're starting now, I look at, you know, Hyalite Reservoir. You know, there was all, there was all

kinds of complaints, you know back, back in the '70s, you know, 20 inch cutthroat, 21 inch cutthroats were caught. And nowadays you know a 16 inch cutthroat is a big one. And it's simply they just stock the hell out of it, and the theory was everybody out there is gonna catch fish, you know that's what they managed for. And finally, you know under pressure, I think they've cut back on the stocking and even stopping it and right now the fish are getting bigger you know? And you're managing for some quality fishing. And I think, I think that's the direction we have to take is that... look at what's happened in Canyo- Canyon Ferry, Canyon Ferry has turned into a warm water fishery basically, it's what it is now. And they're worried about the pike, the pike are in there now, and they're worried about them getting down, down the- down the river to Lake Helena which is, which is prime pike habitat. And what happens when they get there, what's going to happen there.

James Thull [00:36:47] Yeah.

Fred Nelson [00:36:48] Yeah so, you know there's so much change in our, our, our, our lakes and reservoirs that they're going to have to start looking at real closely what- what's going on.