



What began as a hopeful experiment 20 years ago on a handful of trout streams has evolved into an immensely popular program that benefits both our environment and economy.

DELAYED HARVEST DELIGHTS

Written and Photographed By Jim Dean

Wilson Creek (above and opposite) is one of more recent additions to the Wildlife Resources Commission's Delayed Harvest trout program.

The crests of the mountains that day in the early 1990s were a pale green with splashes of pink and white from redbuds and dogwoods as I headed north out of Wilkesboro. I was bound for a small stream that originates high up near Wildcat Rocks on the Blue Ridge Parkway and tumbles southeast through mature forest until it links up with the Middle Prong of Roaring River in the valley. I had fished it before, and knew it held a good population of mostly small wild rainbows that were prospering under special Blue Ridge Parkway regulations that permitted only artificial lures or flies and restricted the number of trout that could be kept.

I pulled into the parking area, gathered my gear and began the long hike up the trail to get to the more remote portions where I hoped I might not encounter other anglers. The wild trout in these small streams can be notoriously spooky, and they're nearly impossible to catch if someone is fishing ahead of you. Everywhere I wanted to fish, however, I ran into other fishermen or soon

realized I was following fresh footprints—not surprising since it was a glorious spring weekend.

By mid-afternoon, I had yet to catch a trout. It was too late to drive to another similar wild trout stream (I had only one day to fish), so I began the long walk back to the car, beaten and dejected.

Maybe I ought to check out the Middle Prong before I leave, I thought. I had driven alongside it coming up the valley, but I hadn't paid much attention because I knew it was somewhat marginal water that held mostly hatchery trout stocked by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Besides, I had seen lots of fishermen. But it was my last resort, and I also knew that it was one of a handful of streams that the Wildlife Commission had recently introduced under a new experimental regulation called Delayed Harvest.

I pulled off the gravel road and watched several fishermen. Most were using spinning tackle, but one was fly-fishing. It was quickly evident that they were catching trout regularly, including an occasional sizeable one.

"Looks like you guys are doing pretty well," I said to one older fisherman who was taking a break sitting on a nearby rock.



“Yeah, I really like this deal,” he replied. “I don’t get around too well anymore, but this water is easy to get to, and there are always lots of fish. I don’t mind turning them loose now, either, especially since I’ll be able to keep some later in the year. It’s about the only place I fish for trout anymore.”

I drove slowly until I found an unoccupied pool, thinking I might try it for an hour. So what if these were hatchery fish and relatively easy to catch? Like that older angler, I also didn’t mind releasing them—that’s what I would have done with those wild fish I’d been stalking earlier. The afternoon slipped away gently, and it was nearly dark before I finally tore myself away—and well past midnight before I got home. It hadn’t been the remote, wild trout experience I’d been seeking, but I had to admit that it had been lots of fun, and something I would surely try again.

Some 20 years have passed since that day, and it’s a pretty good bet that every trout fisherman in North Carolina now knows how this experiment turned out.

The Wildlife Commission’s Delayed Harvest program has since expanded to 21 streams and one lake as of this writing, with two more streams proposed for addition. More waters are almost sure to be added in future years. (A list of all Delayed Harvest waters and their locations, along with applicable regulations, can be found in the 2011–2012 N.C. Inland Fishing, Hunting and Trapping Regulations Digest.)

“The Delayed Harvest trout program is by far the Wildlife Commission’s most popular fisheries program, and may even be the most popular program of any type we’ve ever offered,” says Doug Besler, mountain region fisheries supervisor.

That is a truly impressive acknowledgement for a state agency that has been managing fishing, hunting, trapping and boating in North Carolina since 1947. Indeed, it seems almost miraculous that the relatively simple adjustments in regulations that make up the Delayed Harvest concept could achieve such enormous popularity, not to mention many other



Brothers Larry Kapps (left) of Mooresville and Ken Kapps of Denver finish a day on Wilson Creek. Ken estimates he fishes the stream about 150 times a year.

benefits, including some that reach beyond fishing to enhance local economies.

The current Delayed Harvest regulations provide that fishermen must release all the trout they catch from Oct. 1 until the first Saturday in June, and they are restricted to using only a single-hook artificial lure (or fly). However, beginning on the first Saturday in June, fishermen can keep seven trout a day caught by hook and line, with no size restrictions and no bait or lure restrictions. Nor are there any restrictions against the use of bait or lures. These regulations apply through Sept. 30 of the same year, and on Oct. 1, they again revert to catch-and-release using only a single-hook artificial lure.

One change that went into effect this past summer is that from 6 a.m. to noon on the first Saturday in June, the opportunity to fish and keep a limit of seven fish is restricted to youths under age 16, and they don’t need a fishing or trout license (licensed adults can accompany them, but cannot fish during the youth-only period. At noon, that opportunity then extends to all fishermen and lasts until

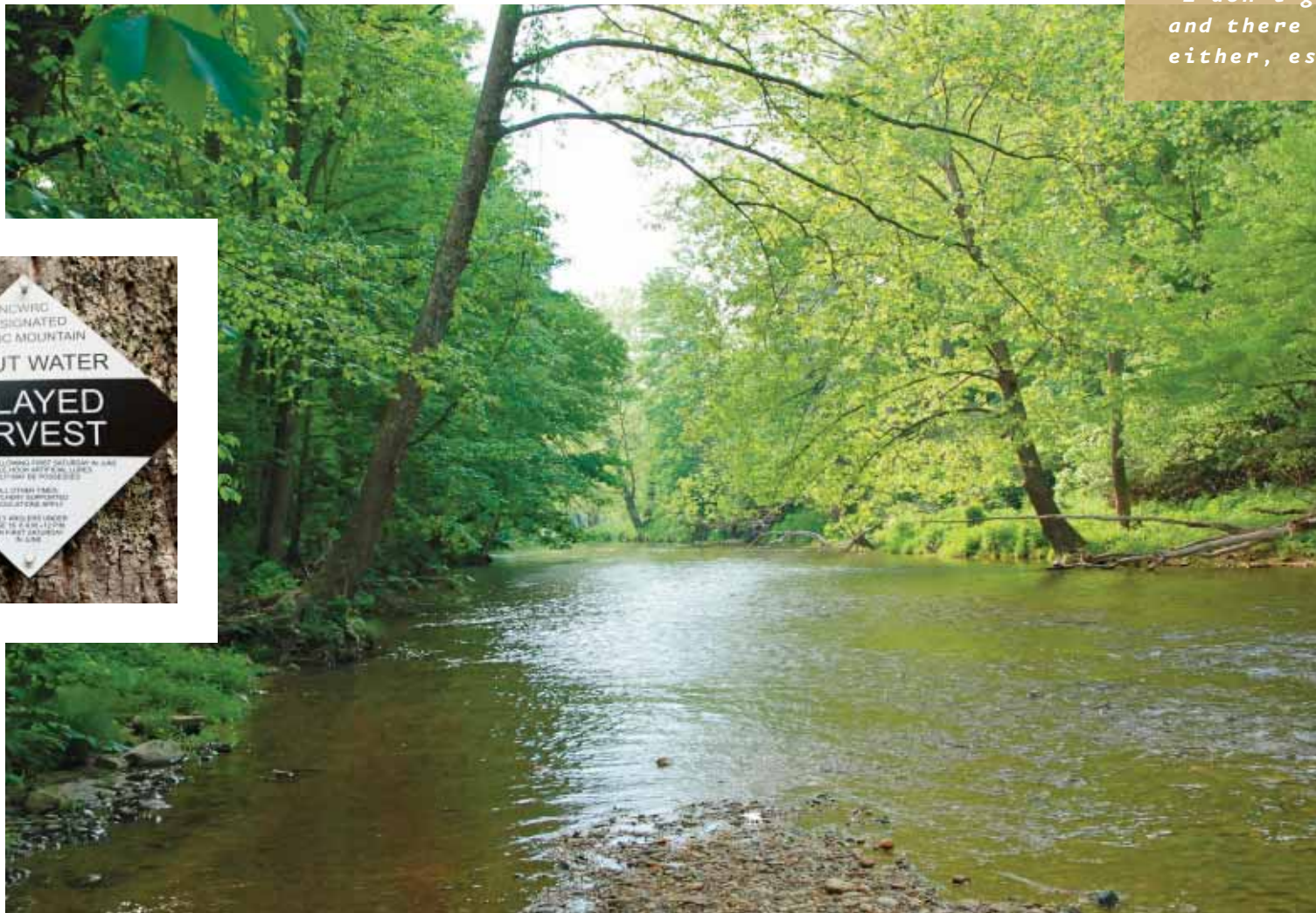
Oct. 1. As you would expect, adults fishing these Delayed Harvest streams need a valid resident or non-resident fishing license, as well as a trout license.

At a glance, it’s a very simple concept. Fishermen can fish eight months knowing that the water they are fishing is full of trout. The Wildlife Commission stocks these streams heavily with triploid (sterile) trout, and some larger trout are included. Incidentally, all Hatchery Supported and Delayed Harvest streams are now stocked entirely with triploid trout in North Carolina to protect wild stocks, particularly native brook trout (See “Fish by the Millions,” June 2011 WINC).

During the period when trout must be released, fish stocked into these waters remain available to catch (some incidental mortality among released trout is unavoidable, but the majority of fish survive to be caught again). For the remaining four months, a daily limit of those trout can be caught and kept. Then the cycle repeats. Call it Delayed Harvest, deferred compensation or having your trout and eating it, too, it has worked wonderfully.



“I don’t get around too well anymore, but this water is easy to get to, and there are always lots of fish. I don’t mind turning them loose now, either, especially since I’ll be able to keep some later in the year.”



An angler (above) catches and prepares to release a Wilson Creek rainbow. The Watauga River (left) is an accessible and handsome piece of Delayed Harvest water.

The Delayed Harvest program does not affect or change the way the many other trout streams and waters are regulated and managed in North Carolina. There are still vast miles of Hatchery Supported streams, and also many miles of streams managed for wild trout, some of which are restricted to pure catch-and-release. Since these classifications of streams are not our subject, however, we won't get into the Wildlife Commission regulations that govern them (these are also explained in the *Regulations Digest*).

One of the most important elements of the Delayed Harvest program is that it adds to the total mileage of trout water in the state. Wildlife Commission fisheries biologists make every attempt to evaluate and select streams to add to the Delayed Harvest program that aren't already in the state trout management program.

"For Delayed Harvest streams, we make a conscientious effort not to reduce the mileage of our hatchery-supported streams, but instead look for streams or stretches of streams that can be new acquisitions," explains Besler. "Typically, this is water that is marginal trout habitat that may get too warm in the summer to sustain a successful stream-bred population, but we want it to remain cool enough to keep the hatchery trout we stock alive. We're also looking for water that is easily accessible to lots of fishermen."

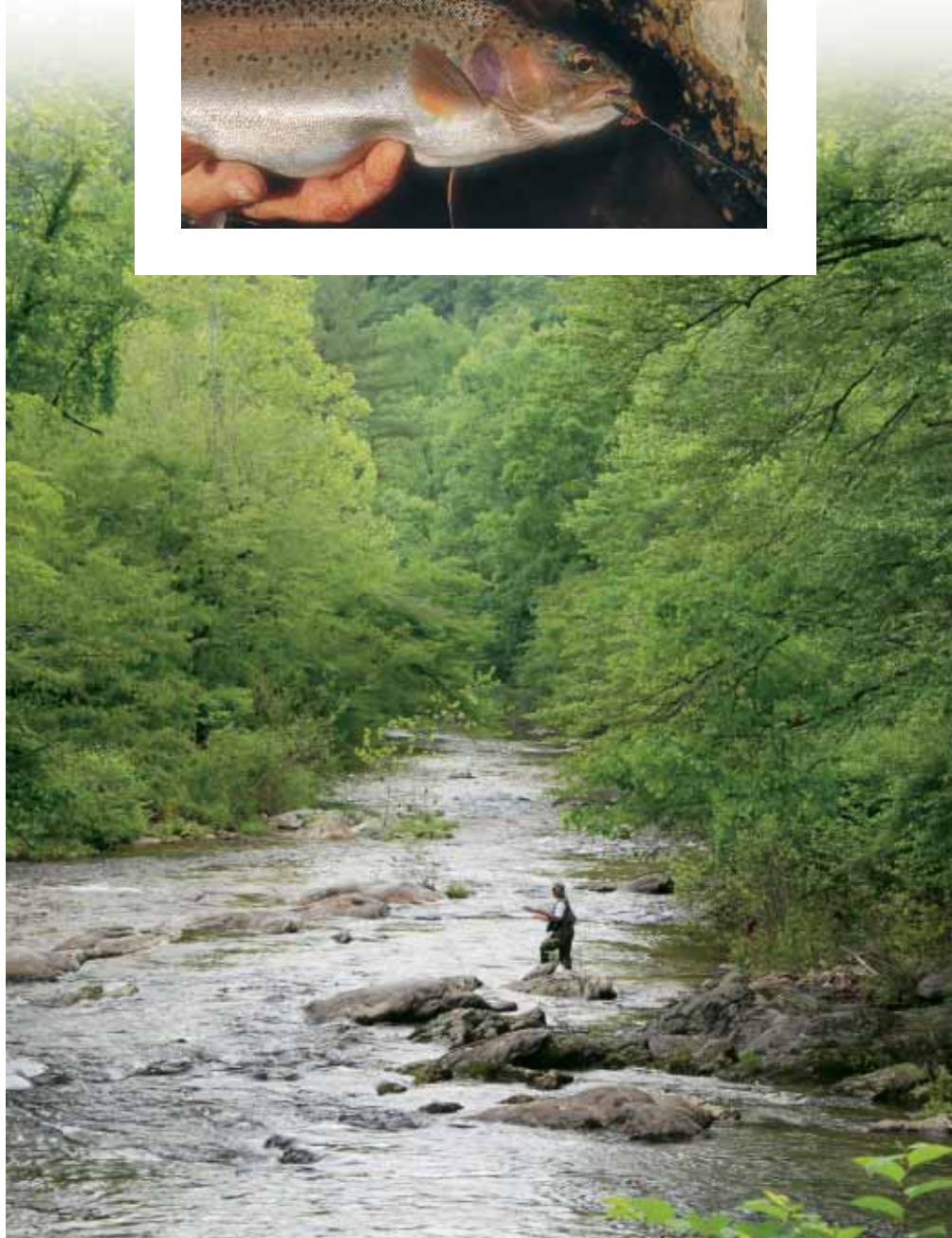
"A good example is the North Toe River. Spruce Pine suffered a lot of damage in the flood of 2004, so we worked with the town to get public access to 2 miles of the North Toe that flows through Spruce Pine to add to the Delayed Harvest program."

"We worked out the same sort of arrangement on Mill Creek at Old Fort," said Besler. "Another good example is the 3½-mile stretch of Wilson Creek that was part of a significant land acquisition made available through the generosity of the O. P. Lutz family. This was not previously public water, but it is now in the Delayed Harvest program, and it's extremely popular. These Delayed Harvest waters have added a new dimension and greater fishing opportunity to our overall program."

Some of the benefits provided by the Delayed Harvest waters were anticipated, but some have been a pleasant surprise. The streams are typically selected because they are accessible and generally easy to fish. That makes them especially popular among



In addition to many large, deep pools, the Delayed Harvest stretch of Wilson Creek also has lots of productive runs and riffles.



fishermen who might not have time, or be physically able to hike into remote streams.

"It is typically difficult to provide opportunities for disabled fishermen on streams, but we've been able to make handicapped access possible on some Delayed Harvest streams, and we're looking to do more of this," says Besler.

Delayed Harvest waters are also terrific places for any newcomer to learn to fish, especially with a fly-rod. During the eight-month period when trout must be released, they are also ideal places to introduce youngsters to the sport, because it's an almost sure bet that they'll catch fish.

"Kids usually haven't fished enough to develop a lot of patience, so catching fish right from the start keeps them interested and helps build confidence," says Besler. "The fact that Delayed Harvest streams are open year round is also a plus. No matter what the weather is like, there always seem to be fishermen out there."

There are also environmental assets to Delayed Harvest that some early advocates might not have anticipated. For example, fishermen who generally prefer to fish wild trout streams (and especially those who are advocates of catch-and-release) appreciate the Delayed Harvest waters for another reason—these fishing spots are so popular that they tend to draw some of the fishing pressure away from more fragile Wild Trout waters. Many fishermen believe that fishing and fish populations on some Wild Trout waters may be improving as a result.

Hardly anyone, however, anticipated the extraordinary economic benefits that Delayed Harvest waters have created.

"We estimate that 130,000 anglers fished for trout in 2008 in North Carolina," says Besler. "Trout fishermen spend an estimated \$174 million dollars a year in this state to fish, and that doesn't include trout fishing in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park or at the Cherokee Indian Reservation."

"A lot of this can be traced to the immense popularity of the Delayed Harvest program. We estimate that a Hatchery Supported stream contributes about \$600,000 each year to the local economy, while a Delayed Harvest stream is worth \$2.2 million to the local economy. Where there are towns that have streams running through them, or nearby, we've worked hard to encourage those communities to provide public access to that



The 3½-mile stretch of Delayed Harvest waters on Wilson Creek is not only productive, but beautiful. Previously this was private water.

water for angling opportunities. We're having some success because these waters can be a real asset to localities that have experienced a period of economic decline. All we ask of them is that they grant guaranteed public access to the water."

An important thing to remember is that virtually all wild trout water is on public land (national forests, parks, etc.), while 85 percent of stocked streams are on private property. Thus, when a community can work with cooperative landowners to grant stream access on private holdings for a local Delayed Harvest stream, everybody wins. Fishermen get an easily accessible place to fish where the fishing is almost always terrific, and the community reaps the economic benefits from all those visiting anglers.

With North Carolina's population growing, and more and more fishermen arriving from other parts of the country to live here, the Delayed Harvest trout program and its solid economic benefits are almost certain to continue to increase.

How, you might wonder, did all this get started? Besler credits former fisheries biologist Jim Borawa for suggesting that such a program might work here.

Borawa was stationed in Asheville as the Wildlife Resources Commission's cold-water research coordinator when he became aware that Pennsylvania was experimenting with a fledgling Delayed Harvest program—the first ever in the country. Borawa thought the idea showed promise, and he recommended that North Carolina consider giving something similar a try.

The first Delayed Harvest streams in North Carolina were proposed for the 1992 season, but the program was limited to only the spring months. Fishermen liked it from the beginning, however, and there seemed to be no unforeseen problems. Indeed, it even proved viable from a fisheries management standpoint. It was cost efficient, sites were easy to stock and there was a more favorable catch rate of stocked fish that were never expected to survive anyway (what an economist might call "a good return on investment"). In 1996, the Delayed Harvest concept was expanded to fall and spring, and since that time it has evolved into the current program and grown steadily.

Indeed, Besler and others in the Commission believe that Delayed Harvest has a long way yet to run. "There's still a lot of potential out there," said Besler. "There are streams and small lakes scattered throughout the western part of the state that could prove suitable for Delayed Harvest. Communities like Spruce Pine and Old Fort are already enjoying the long-term benefits Delayed Harvest streams can provide, and others can, too."

Perhaps the only odd thing about this is the realization that there is a government-sponsored program that apparently has nearly universal and enthusiastic acceptance. Some might argue that this is as rare as going fishing and knowing that you're almost sure to catch something. ♦

Jim Dean is the retired editor of Wildlife in North Carolina and writes the long-running "Our Natural Heritage" column each month.