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Fishing: Hot topic of global warming

Bill Thompson

— The hot topic the last few days has been the weather. A lot of conversations of late have started with the well-worn phrase of “hot enough for you?”

Most of us would agree that it is hot enough, in fact to darn hot for this time of year. The follow up question has just about always been “you think there is anything to this global warming thing?” A lot of Doubting Thomases are beginning to think that maybe there is. The fact is most would agree there is something indeed to this global warming thing. To be sure, we have had warm winters before and one warm winter, or for that matter two, does not make it a fact, but the trend is undeniable to all but the most stubborn.

The effects of global warming on fishing will be profound and we are already experiencing some of the change that will only intensify in the years ahead. One area already showing the effects is the ocean. Since 1980 the ocean temperature has risen nearly a full degree. One degree does not sound like a whole lot, but in the great scheme of things it is dramatic. The effects of a one- to two-degree change can change fish habitats, which ultimately leads to loss of numbers and species of fish.

Warmer ocean temperatures also lead to an increase in violent weather and more red tide. We are already seeing the effects of the melting polar caps and glaciers around the world with a rising sea level. Many of the barrier islands along our coast line are beginning to disappear. These islands have always provided a natural defense to the coast line from severe weather and hurricanes. Ironically, global warming may have a plus side for anglers as well as a negative side. Last year in August commercial fishermen in Rhode Island caught tarpon, cobia and several species of sharks

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not known to inhabit New England waters. Can you imagine being able to catch tarpon on Joppa Flats?

However, the downside would seem to outweigh any benefits associated with changes in migratory habits of game fish. The striper, a favorite game species of northeast coastal anglers, could already be showing decline because of warmer water temperatures. With less snow and rain in the midsection of America there is less runoff into the Chesapeake Bay, the major spawning ground for East Coast stripers. With less runoff there is less fresh water flowing into tidal areas, resulting in less suitable spawning water for stripers. With warmer water, striper migration patterns could change and they would bypass southern New England in significant numbers and head for Nova Scotia. Populations along the southern Atlantic coast line would disappear altogether.

One of the great questions concerning global warming is whether or not it is caused by greenhouse gasses. Regardless of what your position is on the subject, more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere means an increase in the oceans' as well. As a result, the pH level in our oceans are changing, making the water more acidic, which in turn can threaten the growth of organisms such as coral and plankton. This has a huge impact on the food chain, resulting in less smaller fish so important to the larger species. If you are a New Hampshire trout fisherman then you are already aware of what acid rain has done to our trout ponds.

The Catch-22 in all of this is there are no long-term data to give any definitive proof of how warmer water will affect fish populations. While we ponder the question and collect more data, the situation is deteriorating before our eyes. At this point, however, there is a preponderance of evidence that we do have a problem and that the overwhelming majority of the scientific community is in agreement. Unfortunately the issue of global warming has taken on a political identity, dividing the issue along party lines. A short look back through the editorial and letters to the editor pages in this newspaper will easily confirm this. By now the country should be well beyond the political rhetoric of both the right and the left and recognize that there is a problem and the time has come to act.

See you on the river.

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