

The St. Joseph River in Indiana: An SFR Vision of Success

The St. Joseph River rises in southwestern Michigan and starts its leisurely flow south and west through northern Indiana. Known to locals as the “St. Joe,” it flows through South Bend, virtually in sight of the campus of the University of Notre Dame, before returning to its native state and entering Lake Michigan.

The St. Joe, like many other rivers in the Great Lakes Basin, is rich in history.

But the St. Joe is also unique.

It represents a remarkable blend of vision, partnership and perseverance – a blend that has yielded one of the most remarkable fisheries in America. And the “go-to” location for the exciting Skamania steelhead.

This was not always the case. In fact, less than 40 years ago, the St. Joe was but another struggling Midwestern fishery impacted by increased development, industrialization and urban encroachment. Its fishery kept some local anglers busy and reasonably happy. But fishery managers and a relative handful of anglers in two states realized the river could become so much more.

In 1969, Michigan’s Department of Natural Resources (DNR) began an experimental stocking of trout and salmon in the lower 23 miles of the river. The results encouraged Michigan to forge ahead with fish passage structures on existing dams. These early successes with anadromous fishes on Michigan’s reach of the St. Joe led the Indiana DNR to engage in discussions with Michigan and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to craft what would become “The St. Joseph River Interstate Cooperative Salmonid Management Plan” in 1980.

A significant portion of the early funding for this plan came from the now lapsed Anadromous Fish Conservation Act, which enabled Indiana to construct fish passage facilities around dams and secure increased public access for boaters and anglers. One-third of the funding for the project came from the Sport Fish Restoration Fund (SFR), the special excise tax monies collected on fishing tackle and motorboat fuel.

One of the great benefits of the SFR funds in the St. Joe project is the program’s ability to support long-term projects. It has helped sustain the dynamic partnership achieved among angling organizations, boaters, resource managers, local communities and private businesses including American Electric Power.

The outstanding and nationally recognized Skamania steelhead fishery that now brings throngs of anglers to the St. Joe each year is the result of careful planning and good listening. Project partners continue to strive for improvements in the fishery.

Developments in Indiana have been particularly notable. While Indiana’s portion of the river supports a Skamania fishery for only 16 miles (compared to Michigan’s 47), Indiana DNR has sought to create a network of boat launch and angler access sites throughout this reach. The state has also applied a portion of its SFR funds to the creation of an important steelhead fishery.

This fishery, on the St. Joe in Indiana, has been a boon not just to anglers, but also to the entire regional economy, generating several million dollars in benefits to local communities.

Thanks to the vision and cooperation of two states, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and many organizations and individuals, an exciting fishery thrives where it had never existed. Thanks, in part, to the equipment and fuel expenditures of anglers and boaters, an award winning, top-rated steelhead fishery has been delivered to the doorstep of thousands of urban anglers.