Restoring a Native to South Carolina's Upcountry

It's a rather small fish, seldom reaching even a foot in length. Its habitat requirements are among the most demanding of any game fish. And it doesn't compete well with other species.

These hardly seem like traits that would make any critter particularly interesting or appealing to anglers. Yet many hold this little fish in the highest esteem. To many, in fact, it is the crown jewel of the Southern Highlands.

The fish is the native eastern brook trout – and its fans are many and avid.

Yet the brook trout is a species facing some peril these days, especially the Southern Appalachian strain. The brook trout is the only member of the trout and salmon family, known as *salmonid*, that's native to the southeastern United States.

Its ancestral home was the realm of countless mountain streams and upland rivers that drained the high country of the entire Appalachian region. These pristine little waters flowed through mountains rich in towering hardwoods and pine that were eventually felled to fuel farms and cities over the span of three centuries.

By the end of the 20th century, the native brook trout had been eliminated from nearly 75 percent of its former range.

Even within its remaining range, its habitat was growing insecure. Acid precipitation, road building and poor farming practices were all exacting a toll. Introduced rainbow and brown trout were displacing the native species, especially within the southern portion of its range.

Fisheries managers and anglers wanted to help the cherished native. And if South Carolina's recent endeavors are accurate indicators, there is some legitimate cause for optimism.

Biologists with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) began a restoration project in Oconee County in August 2005. They selected King Creek, a small tributary to the Chattooga River within the Sumter National Forest, because it had sustained a reproducing population of brook trout until the mid-1990's, when the species was displaced by non-native brown trout.

The state and federal agencies together assembled a team of biologists and resource specialists from Clemson University and Great Smokey Mountain National Park (a pioneer in native brook trout restoration). The first step in the King Creek project was to remove the non-native brown trout, which the team was able to accomplish using a special EPA-approved piscicide called Fintrol.

In 2006, biologists released 150 native eastern brook trout of the pure Southern Appalachian strain into their new home. Later field work disclosed that the new trout were indeed reproducing and re-establishing their kind in King Creek.

The success of the King Creek endeavor set the stage for equally successful restoration efforts on nearby Crane Creek the following year.

While one important key to success has been the excellent partnership between South Carolina's DNR and USFS biologists, the work would not have been possible without funding from the state's Sport Fish Restoration funds – those derived from the special excise tax monies

collected on fishing tackle and motorboat fuel. These funds are provided by anglers and boaters each time they purchase the equipment and fuel essential to their outdoor pursuits.

These projects may indeed bring the native trout of the southeast a happier future than it has enjoyed for a long while. The Sport Fish Restoration fund can keep that future bright.