



## Ken Cox: Sustaining Aquatic Habitats

Ken Cox wants you to spend more time outdoors. A fisheries biologist with the Fish & Wildlife Department, Cox has spent the last 32 years working to conserve Vermont's fish populations, and protecting and restoring the aquatic habitats that sustain fish, and give value to our lives. When we sat down last week to talk I wanted to know more about what trends Cox has seen over the last three decades. There have been many, suggests Cox. "There are increasing threats and pressures on our natural resources. We've made a lot of progress to tackle issues of over-exploitation, habitat loss and pollution, but it is a never-ending battle."

What concerns Cox the most though, is what he believes is our society's increasing detachment from the natural world. "Young people are connected digitally, recreation has become more structured and formalized, and youth are not spending as much time outside, just exploring the woods, fields and marshlands the way they once did. If you don't have that connection, how can you see the ecological value or develop a personal attachment to the natural world?"

I asked Ken what he would like to say to readers. Pressures on ecological systems are increasing, he explains. There are more invasives, there is decreasing native species diversity and there is climate change. He worries that we don't seem to learn from the mistakes of the past. "Flood response is an example, another is disregard for the ecological values of riparian habitats and a third is nutrient and contaminant loading. You can go back as far as the late 1800's and even then these issues were known and were being talked about. And yet over 100 years later we are making the same mistakes and being surprised when we end up with the same outcomes." What can we do about this, I ask. "Nothing will change unless people change their behavior. If you learn something new and interesting at a meeting or through the media that's a start. But, if you then walk out the door and go home and do nothing differently, than there will be no new outcome. You have to act upon information available in order to make improvements. We as state resource stewards need to find more effective ways to motivate people to do the right thing. Public education is half the battle; getting them to apply this knowledge is the other half."

Ken talks about some of the actions that he has taken over the years with the department, monitoring impacts and uses by humans on aquatic habitats; helping to develop and implement regulatory recommendations for the protection of aquatic species and their habitats; and getting involved in outreach efforts. "I try to show people how important healthy aquatic habitats are, not just for the organisms that live there but for us too. I have served as a department expert in its responsibilities to conserve state threatened and endangered fishes." Among other responsibilities Cox provides expert testimony for Act 250 and Section 248 proceedings, and is the co-author of a book about Vermont fishes. He collaborates with other organizations working on conservation of aquatic habitat, including watershed groups, anglers groups, academic institutions and other state and federal agencies. "Working in conjunction with others," he tells me, "has been extremely rewarding. There is a new generation of fisheries biologists out there, and being able to pass on knowledge about Vermont's natural resources is very exciting. There is so much accumulated learning to share."

I ask Ken to share any last thoughts. "It's pretty simple," he says. "Experience nature. Appreciate what we have. When going out for a walk or run leave your mp3 player at home. Stop, look and listen to what nature has to offer. There is so much around you that goes unnoticed and therefore is unappreciated, such as the sights and sounds of wildlife, the flora, etc. Learn to appreciate quiet; there is so much noise in our world. Go outside in the evening and look up at the night sky. We take so much of the natural world for granted. There are so many people who live in urban-suburban areas who are cut off from what we Vermonters live with every day. We are losing nature. Vermont is still a special place and we are so close to losing it and I don't think people realize it. Being tuned in to the natural world is as important for people as it is for the health of the environment. It creates health – including mental and spiritual health. People need nature. I remember being a

kid and being outside all of the time exploring. Those experiences instilled in me a respect for the world around me and have guided the rest of my life, not just on the job but in every area of my life. Give those opportunities to your children. It means a lot, and can make a difference in their lives also.”