

Today, most trout tournaments are run as “live weigh” tournaments. Contestants are encouraged to bring their catch in alive, so they can be returned to the water after they're weighed. A penalty is charged for bringing a dead fish to the scales, or a reward is offered for bringing in a live one.

Things were not done this way in the past. When I fished in Troutmasters events, we brought in a maximum of three fish per day, always dead. I would never fish in a “kill” tournament today, nor do I think such events are appropriate in the 21st Century. In fact, I don't fish many tournaments at all anymore, mostly because I don't own or use oxygen tanks and the other equipment used to keep fish alive while they are transported to the weigh stations.

Furthermore, I don't allow my customers to retain fish in the 23 to 28-inch class. We release all trout of those sizes (except those which obviously won't survive) so we can do our part to enhance the trophy potential of the fishery. I will not break my boat rules because “I'm fishing a tournament”. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. In other words, if it's a bad idea to kill medium-sized trout on a charter, it's a bad idea to kill them in a tournament.

I do allow customers to decide whether they want to keep and kill a fish meeting or exceeding two standards: 28 inches AND 8 pounds. If a customer desires to kill such a trout, they must tell me they are doing so because they want to send it to the taxidermist for skin-mounting purposes. For the record, very few of my customers keep fish of these dimensions, most of them preferring instead to document their length and girth accurately with a tape measure, take some pictures and/or video and release them. I keep the tools necessary for such documentation, including the camera, on hand at all times, to encourage people to release the big trout they catch. Some use the measurements to have taxidermists produce replica mounts.

I do all these things in attempt to provide leadership in the area of conservation. Big, old trout produce many more eggs than do smaller ones; they are perhaps the most important fish in the system. I understand why someone would want to create a skin mount of a giant trout. My first thirty-incher adorns the wall above the computer as I type these words. I also recognize a need to encourage people to release all trophy fish which have a chance to survive, so they can continue to create more of their kind, and because someone else might catch them again (when they've grown even larger).

Ironically, the most prominent trout fishing tournament in the Lone Star State today, the CCA STAR Tournament, does not allow fish to be weighed alive. While CCA does some things in an enlightened manner, such as creating a high standard for qualification (8 pounds), they could do a much better job of stewardship if they changed the way they ran the trout division of their popular yearly competition.

No entity which describes itself by name as a “conservation association” should involve itself in a kill tournament. While I won't address the issue with regard to other species, I will suggest several other ways CCA could run the trout division of the STAR.

1. They could simply **allow** people to weigh their trout alive and return them to the water. CCA could do this without taking any responsibility for the fish, leaving it up to the anglers to release the fish.

2. They could **require** people to weigh their trout in live. In this case, CCA would return them to the water, or keep them and donate them to the state's hatchery facilities. This would require weighing stations to be ready to retain the fish in live wells long enough to allow them to be transferred to the state's facilities.
3. They could allow people to submit digital images to document their catch. In such a system, length would probably be a better way to determine the winner. Anglers could be issued a tape with an identifying mark when they entered the tournament, and be required to use the tape to clearly document the length of their trout, in an image with a time and date stamp. If CCA wants to continue using the weight of the trout to determine a winner, they could issue each contestant a numbered scale and require them to submit images showing the fish hanging from the scale, while clearly displaying the weight.
4. They could release tagged trout (any size big enough to keep) from the hatchery and award prizes to those who capture the tagged fish, just like they do in the redfish division. This format would allow people of all skill levels to have a greater chance of winning, and might consequently increase participation in the event.

Any of these changes would result in the killing of fewer large trout each year as a result of participation in the STAR tournament. If CCA makes none of the above changes to their event, they should, at the very least, do the following things:

1. Issue every tournament contestant some kind of scale and tell them to use it to weigh the trout they catch. They should also tell them to release any trout not weighing at least eight pounds. Their current plan encourages people to come to the scales with fish which don't meet the 8-pound standard. Many people can't tell an 8-pound fish from a 6 pounder with the naked eye. Any association actively encouraging the killing of 6 to 8-pound trout is doing the fishery a disservice.
2. Reduce the number of prizes awarded in each division to 1. And, tell all contestants to monitor the leaderboard and release any big trout caught, unless it will replace the top entry on the board. In other words, if a 9 pound fish is in the lead, don't bring an 8 pounder to the scale. By giving out five prizes, CCA is essentially placing too small a bounty on the heads of the fish which don't qualify for the top prize.

I plead guilty to allowing a tiny number of giant trout to be retained for mounting purposes over the years. But I and my clients release almost all of the "STAR Quality" trout we catch, and I take credit for doing several other meaningful and conservative things to help preserve the fishery; some of those things probably prevent me from making more money. I think it's time CCA stepped up to the plate and changed the way they operate the trout division of the STAR. After all, they tout themselves as a leader in the fight to preserve and enhance the quality of the fishery.

In essence, CCA should manage the STAR in the best interests of the trout, not of its human members or employees.