

Darters and Bass Get a Pass

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Southerners talk music,” penned Mark Twain. And when Oklahoma fishing guide Ethan Wright talks smallmouth bass fishing, it’s like listening to a chorus. He can’t bridle his enthusiasm for the outdoors—and in particular, fishing for smallmouth bass in his part of Oklahoma.

“I’m blessed, really blessed, to live and work here,” said Wright in his unmistakable musical brogue. Wright makes a living fishing rivers and creeks in the Kiamichi Mountains of southeast Oklahoma, including waters on the Honobia Wildlife Management Area. Much of the land in Honobia WMA is owned by the Hancock Timber Resource Group, and co-managed with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), and Resource Management Services, Hancock Timber’s forest manager. “I’ve got to give back,” added Wright in a tone of gratitude. “I feel a need to do something for the environment that I enjoy.”

That giving back comes in the form of helping U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) fish biologists conduct leopard darter population counts in the upland streams that also harbor an object of his affection, and his guiding business. The leopard darter (*Percina pantherina*; photo on table of contents page) is an endangered species that lives in fast-flowing riffles over gravels and cobbles. The fish is naturally confined to many of the streams Wright fishes in the upper reaches of the Little River basin. On more than one occasion Wright has donned the snorkel and swam alongside biologists.

Though the leopard darter stares extinction in the face, its lot in life has improved thanks to the USFWS Fish Passage Program, a program that’s about uniting people, joining habitats, and connecting fish populations.

There’s no better example of success than the partnerships between Hancock Timber, the ODWC, and USFWS. Fish

Passage projects on Hancock Timber’s 215,000-acre Kiamichi Mountain parcel have expanded habitats for the endangered darter and economically important smallmouth bass.

About 40 low-water road crossings dot the map on this corporate forest land. Culvert road crossings over small streams may look harmless, but to migrating fish, they may pose insurmountable barriers. Matching dollars and collective technical expertise have replaced two migration barriers with fish-friendly road crossings on Hancock Timber lands through the Fish Passage Program. Now, with access to move about to more habitat, these fish populations are no longer restrained from finding spawning gravels, or cover to hide from predators. Deep pools are now more available for fish to ride out the coldest and warmest months of the year.

“The new road crossings are good for fish and good for foresters,” said Hancock Timber’s Southern Regional Manager, Mike Wolf. Hancock Timber is a subsidiary of Boston-based John Hancock Financial Services. Five more road-crossing barriers are slated to be replaced this year, opening up an additional 50 stream miles to bass and darters.

Many of the streams harboring leopard darter flow through Hancock Timber lands. And like any successful business, Hancock Timber looks to the future, taking a long-term view on its fiduciary investments. That view extends to natural resources in the company’s care, and leopard darter and smallmouth bass are beneficiaries.

So is Wright.

“What’s good for leopard darters is good for smallmouths,” said Wright. He knows that his guiding business depends on a quality fishery, and he’s all for taking care of the leopard darter. He, too, takes a long-term view on natural resources, that returns come in the future, and that’s the very nature of conservation—an investment in the future. 🐟