

Friends and neighbors help take care of the river

The Au Sable River has already been through at least one major ecological disaster, at least from the grayling's point of view. And a group of property owners and volunteers are doing what they can, tree by tree, to prevent another one.

Back in the logging era, cedar trees that once created a canopy over the Au Sable made the river beautiful, kept the water cool and provided a haven for the grayling, a type of trout that was native to the river and thrived in huge numbers. But the trees got chopped down, fishermen came in droves and eventually the grayling, which was so common and so popular that the city borrowed its name, was gone.

Today, there are cousin species to the grayling in Wisconsin, a few Western states and northern Canada from Hudson Bay to the Pacific. But Grayling has no grayling.

A group of like-minded people who live on or near the river are worried that a similar change could threaten the brook trout, planted in the river decades ago, and the essential nature of the river. For the past 30 years or so, members of the Au Sable River System Property Owners Association say, the number of deer in the area has grown. While that has been good for hunters, it hasn't been good for the river. The problem is that the deer like to munch on the saplings of the northern white cedar, a tree that has grown in along the banks and now provides shade, cover for the trout and the serenity and beauty that draws so many people. The deer like the saplings so much, in fact, that there has been a significant decrease in the number of young trees over the years, which means there will be fewer and fewer mature cedars in the future to provide shade, stem erosion and provide cover for trout.

Instead of just throwing up their hands, the property owners have decided to do something about it and mounted an effort a few years ago to plant new trees, protecting them from hungry deer until they can take care of themselves and reforest their river. For \$15, river property owners receive planting kits that include 10 northern white cedar seedlings, fencing to keep out the deer, wooden stakes and planting instructions. For trees that have already outgrown the kit, six-foot enclosures are \$3. In three years the program has been responsible for planting and protecting 3,500 seedlings.

That's a lot of trees and a lot of effort. But both are dwarfed by the work that still needs to be done and the commitment that will be needed to see the it through. Because the northern white cedar is a slow-growing, long-lived tree, it will take years for the seedlings to become saplings and more years for them to mature enough to survive the deer. Only then will they be moved to the river where they can become part of the natural cycle. While that might not seem long in nature, for the people who have taken on the task it is a commitment that will last as long as there are hungry deer to eat cedar saplings, which could be a very long time indeed.

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