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by

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**“Clean Water and Better Bass Fishing:” Bass Anglers and Bass
Culture, 1968-1980**

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Culture, 1968-1980**

by

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Report

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Abstract

“Clean Water and Better Bass Fishing:” Bass Anglers and Bass Culture, 1968-1980

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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Abstract: This report argues that bass anglers constituted an important facet of the American environmental movement during the 1970s, especially through the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.), founded by Alabama native Ray Scott in 1968. During this time period, bass anglers formulated a distinct strain of environmentalism rooted in the technologically-mediated landscape where bass anglers caught bass. This form of environmentalism carved out a social space wherein bass anglers could maintain preexisting social orders and hierarchies while addressing issues of the broader environmental movement, including industrial water pollution, poaching, and air quality. As such, bass anglers demonstrate the continual involvement of sportsmen within the environmental movement and the political diversity of the environmental movement.

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INTRODUCTION: Why Not the Bass?

In his 1998 book *Bass Master Shaw Grigsby*, television fishing host and professional bass fisherman Shaw Grigsby makes a passionate defense for bass fishing as a sport of environmentalists. “Our environmental and conservation record goes back 30 years and will stand four-square with that of any environmental group in America,” writes Grigsby. “Our record is based on solid scientific principle. We have led some of the most important environmental battles in America.” To outside observers of bass fishing, the statement seems implausible. Bass anglers, after all, occupy the same place in popular stereotype as NASCAR fans: southern white males throwing back beers in the back of their camouflage pickup trucks and voting straight-line Republican every chance they get. How could such a group be lumped with environmentalists? Why would they see themselves as environmentalists?¹

This essay examines a crucial moment in the formation of bass fishing as a popular sport and market tour de force. In the 1960s, bass fishing was a popular sport with diffuse, unorganized participants. One of the key forces that coalesced the sport was the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society, formed by Alabama native Ray Scott in 1968. Scott would later become the Alabama chair of George H.W. Bush’s failed bid for the

¹ Shaw Grigsby and Robert Coram, *Bass Master Shaw Grigsby: Notes on Fishing and Life* (National Geographic, 2000), 166.

presidency in 1980. The peculiar strain of environmentalism that characterized the early mobilization efforts of bass anglers under B.A.S.S. arose out of a technologically mediated modern landscape. Because of this, bass anglers argued for a vision of environmental ethics that drew on a fundamentally different starting point than that of both wilderness advocates and previous generations of sportsmen conservationists. For bass anglers, the natural environment where they practiced their sport relied on both intensive and extensive technological management and intervention from state and national actors. This starting point put bass anglers in conversation with the environmental movement writ large. It allowed them to identify as conservationists and environmentalists within the limits their sport.

Through both political action and the pages of its member magazine *Bassmaster*, B.A.S.S. articulated a vision of conservation predicated on the idea that government was supposed to work for the people, that the problems of pollution and water quality could be fixed through mass action, and that science and technology could be harnessed to improve fishing and the environment. Throughout the 1970s, this group of bass anglers sued over waterway pollution, campaigned against acid rain, and campaigned in favor of taxation on fishing equipment. Bass anglers saw themselves as people playing and living in nature, rather than apart from it.

The conservation ideals espoused by B.A.S.S. found a wide audience, as the organization told anglers to “to demand, yes, demand adequate water standard and legal enforcement of existing regulatory standards [sic]... and to detect and report any polluter and call public and political attention to his act.” For this group, changing the status quo

meant working within the system, rather than outside of it. Their broad membership base in rural America decentralizes our understanding of the people reached by environmental consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s, demonstrating historian Brian Drake's argument that "the environmental movement circa 1970 was not a narrow reform effort but a sea change in social values" cutting across lines of class, race, and political allegiances. Taking them seriously as a conservation group sheds light on a population not typically understood as environmentally conscious or environmental activists. Understanding the land and politic ethos of this southern and Midwestern group decentralizes the environmental movement away from the urban and western cores normally associated with the environmental movement.²

This essay also begins addressing two glaring questions in the history of the American environment. First, what was the role of sportsmen in the modern environmental movement? Second, what is the significance of freshwater fish other than trout and salmon? These two questions, it turns out, are intimately related.

Few academics in the humanities study fish, and few have considered the role of sportsmen within the modern environmental movement. As historian James Morton Turner explains in *The Promise of Wilderness*, environmental historians have tended to mark the beginning of the modern environmental movement in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Modern environmentalism focused not on the

² "You're Invited to Join B.A.S.S." pamphlet, undated, "Ray Scott" folder, WHGH Name File, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Brian Allen Drake, "The Skeptical Environmentalist: Senator Barry Goldwater and the Environmental Management State," *Environmental History* 15, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 590; Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 1, 2003): 542.

protection of spaces that concerned earlier generations of environmentalists, but on what Turner calls the “politics of environmentalism:” abating threats to human health, such as pesticides, pollution, and toxic waste. In this rendition, the political goals of modern environmentalists focus not on saving and preserving discrete areas of space, such as mountains or scenic rivers, but on mitigating largely invisible threats.³

As historian John Reiger first argued in 1975, academics tend to pay scant attention to the contributions of sportsmen to conservation. Recent scholarship on hunting has shown the struggles that Progressive-era elite sportsmen encountered when they tried to enforce their vision of conservation on local pothunters and other land users. While significant amounts of scholarship emphasize the role of hunters and anglers in creating early conservation laws and contextualize the process of negotiation between written laws and the lived reality of pothunters and potanglers, hunting and fishing get dropped from the narrative of the modern environmental movement. Even as academics have paid much more attention to hunting, recreational fishing has received little attention. If academics in more recent years have paid more attention to sportsmen of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what sportsmen did in the century afterwards remains largely uncharted.⁴

³ James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 7.

⁴ John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000), viii. For examples of recent scholarship on hunting, see Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Louis S. Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Daniel Justin Herman, *Hunting and the American Imagination* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2001).

Work on the traditional sportfishes of salmon and trout dominate the ranks of scholarship on freshwater fish, and for good cause. Trout are bastardized products of science and tourism, while salmon—arguably only partially a freshwater fish—are ecological, economically, and culturally crucial in the Pacific Northwest.⁵

Salmon and trout both occupy important places in the national imagination. However, the story of what one nineteenth-century observer called “an eminently American fish” has been neglected. The bass is intimately and inextricably tied to the great technological changes in transit, the great dams projects—and the smaller dams projects. No fish has broader mass appeal or market capital today: bass permeate American culture everywhere from suburban shopping malls to television to video games. Musicians write about their “Weapons of Bass Destruction,” internet fantasy leagues follow leading bass fishermen in tournaments, and multiple cable channels dedicate programming to bass fishing shows. ESPN annually broadcasts the Bassmaster Classic tournament as the “Superbowl of Bass Fishing.” For armchair anglers, at least half a dozen bass fishing video games exist for the Nintendo Wii video game platform alone that allow gamers to fish using mechanical rods promising the feel of an actual fishing rod. Travelers in suburban interstates will inevitable spot the bright yellow and red oval logo of Bass Pro Shops dotting the landscape, pointing the way to palatial

⁵ On trout, see: Jennifer Corrinne Brown, “Trout Culture: An Environmental History of Fishing in the Rocky Mountain West, 1860 to 1975” (Ph.D., Washington State University, 2012); Anders Halverson, *An Entirely Synthetic Fish: How Rainbow Trout Beguiled America and Overran the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Paul Schullery, *If Fish Could Scream: An Angler’s Search for the Future of Fly Fishing* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008); Paul Schullery, *Cowboy Trout: Western Fly Fishing As If It Matters* (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006). On salmon, see Jim Lichatowich, *Salmon Without Rivers: A History of the Pacific Salmon Crisis* (Washington, D.C: Island Press, 1999); Joseph E. Taylor, *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

buildings built upon the altar of bass fishing. *Forbes* writer Monte Burke cites figures from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that claim 11.3 million Americans fish for bass at least fifteen days a year. In terms of economic impact, the bass industry as a whole generates \$12 billion each year, or roughly the gross domestic product of Panama. By any measure, bass are a significant part of American culture whose presence has not been accounted for by academics.⁶

I begin the process of accounting in this essay with a discussion of the natural history of the largemouth bass, outlining how a fish endemic to a relatively small area east of the Mississippi and west of the Appalachian Mountains became naturalized to every American state except Alaska. Understanding the confluences of human technology with this fish contextualizes the set of ideas about regulation and the environment that B.A.S.S. later forwarded. The physical environments that allow bass to exist informed the politics of the anglers who fished for them. The framework I draw on in this essay integrates the natural history of bass with the politics of humans. The landscape they share provides the common nexus. In the second part of this essay, I discuss the creation of B.A.S.S., outlining how they created a way for middle-aged white men in the South and Midwest to think of themselves as environmentalists. This paper aims to complicate our understandings of who constituted the environmental movement,

⁶ Monte Burke, *Sowbelly: The Obsessive Quest for the World-Record Largemouth Bass* (New York: Dutton, 2006), 102. In this essay, I use the term “angler” rather than “fisherman” as the term for people fishing recreationally as a leisure activity as opposed to people fishing for their livelihoods. For the internet fantasy league, see fantasyfishing.com; The Bone Collector performs “Weapons of Bass Destruction” on *The Brotherhood Album* (Reprise, 2010), basspro.com has a map of Bass Pro Shops (stores in over twenty states as of July 2013); a sampling of bass fishing video games available for purchase on amazon.com in July 2013 includes: *Cabela’s Monster Bass*, *Sega Bass Fishing*, *The Strike*, and *Rapala Tournament Fishing*.

and to nuance conservatives. It is then, about both humans and fish, conservationism and conservatism.

HOW THE BASS TOOK OVER AMERICA

“The shift from lotic to lentic environments after dam construction often favors generalist over specialists species and puts endemic species at particular risk of extinction, which leads to biotic homogenization.”

—Catherine Reidy Liermann, et al., “Implications of Dam Obstruction for Global Freshwater Fish Diversity,” 2012

To understand the peculiar strain of environmentalism that comes out of bass fishing, it is important to understand the fish’s ecology and natural history. Long before bass became the most popular game fish in the country and claimed the de facto title of the America’s national sport fish, they had quietly transformed the American landscape. The history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as seen through bass, is one of territory expansion predicated on dramatic landscape shaping through human intervention.

“A Swaggering Redneck Linebacker of a Fish”

That an organization ever arose to make bass fish a target of sport, much less the focus of a multi-billion industry, is a product of biology, technology, and ecological manipulation. As far as freshwater fish go, the largemouth is indistinctive; they lack the bright coloring and proportions of the rainbow trout, the fierce needle head of the walleye, or even the catfish’s distinct mustached, fat-lipped face. With their mottled green tops and creamy white undersides, basses seem plain and indistinctive. Fatter members of the species gain weight belly first, taking on a grotesque shape where the fish appears normal except for a bulging beer belly. The best description of the largemouth

comes from professional angler and writer Shaw Grigsby: “He is big, broad shouldered and heavysset; a swaggering redneck linebacker of a fish.”⁷

Physical charm or not, bass rooted themselves across the American landscape long before they became the target of bass anglers. Their biological traits, coupled with the technological advances of their human allies made their ecological ubiquity possible. Though endemic to the an area east of the Mississippi River, bounded by the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes to the south and north, and by the Appalachian Mountains to the east, the bass displayed a remarkable aptitude for adaptation that allowed them to expand their range across the North American continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They found allies in humans who packed them into barrels and spread them to every state except Alaska. Bass crossed the country on nineteenth century railroad systems, colonizing waterways from New York to San Francisco. Their territorial expansion was closely tied to the growth of the railroad. In one instance, the Elkhorn River in Nebraska became stocked with bass when a train wreck deposited bass originally destined for California into the river. More intentionally, railroad men added bass to the ponds that supplied locomotives with water along railroad lines.⁸

At the end of the Civil War, New York lawyer and patrician sportsman Robert Roosevelt (the uncle of Theodore), deemed the bass a fish that “Americans may claim as peculiarly their own” in his book *Superior Fishing*. Roosevelt extolled the bass’s virtues,

⁷ Grigsby and Coram, *Bass Master Shaw Grigsby*, 14. I refer here to the largemouth bass, though bass can also mean spotted and smallmouth bass. The range of the largemouth is wider, and their size and geographic distribution make them the most popular bass to catch.

⁸ Paul Watcher, “The Super Bowl! (Of Fishing): In Search of a Hero at the Bassmaster Classic,” *Harper’s*, April 2013, 72; William H. Robbins and Hugh R. MacCrimmon, *The Blackbass in America and Overseas* (Ontario: Biomanagement and Research Enterprises, 1974), 14–16, 20; see also Christopher Lever, *Naturalized Fishes of the World* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996).

linking biological characteristics of the fish with national identity. “Being a hardy fish,” wrote Roosevelt, “able to endure long journeys, he is readily transported from place to place” and “populating waters that have heretofore produced little besides perch and sunfish.” The bass’s American traits surely meant that the “time will soon come when the worthless yellow perch will be supplanted by his noble congener.” This description might have applied to the processes of western expansion as well.⁹

Roosevelt’s description of the bass as an American fish carry an undercurrent of Manifest Destiny dreams, conjuring a fanciful image of the bass and the white American spreading westward fin in arm. Without directly referencing the technologies and peoples that made the mobility of the bass possible, Roosevelt’s basses progressed westward with nationalistic vigor, expanding their range into new frontiers and rendering them productive spaces.

A generation later, James Henshall, known as the father of American bass fishing, followed Roosevelt’s lead in describing bass as peculiarly American in his 1889 work *The Book of the Black Bass*. Henshall called basses “eminently an American fish,” imbued with positive American characteristics. In Henshall’s fawning description, the bass “has the faculty of asserting himself and making himself completely at home wherever placed. He is plucky, game, brave and unyielding to the last when hooked.”

⁹ Robert B. Roosevelt, *Superior Fishing; or, The Striped Bass, Trout, and Black Bass of the Northern States* (New York: Carleton, 1865), 10-12. Roosevelt served as the Fish Commissioner of New York for two decades and also served as a Congressman in the House of Representatives representing New York. In Congress, he introduced legislation for the United States Fish Commission that would become the forerunner to the modern National Marine Fisheries Service. See “Roosevelt, Robert Barnwell,” in *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1920; “Roosevelt, Robert Barnwell,” in the *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress*, online at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000428>.

These characteristics, he predicted, would make bass the preeminent American gamefish.¹⁰

Roosevelt's vision of a nation populated by bass came true with time. By 1930, the US Bureau of Fisheries reported that the national demand for bass stocks well exceeded the supply, and that better ways of stocking bass were "urgently needed." While the Bureau seemed to have had success in standardizing trout reproduction, which the Bureau likened to feeding "cattle and sheep in pens," raising bass to the three to four inch fingerling release size involved more uncontrollable variables, "analogous to rearing stock in a pasture or open range." Among the problems associated with rearing bass for stocking was cannibalism among improperly fed fish and the need for nesting space for spawning bass. Since bass did not take easily to artificial feed, fishery managers need to replicate natural pond flora and fauna in the controlled environment of the hatchery, hardly an easy task given the complexities of any given ecosystem. As a solution, one Iowa hatchery used separate ponds for spawning and nursing. After the breeding stock spawned, the resulting fry would be skim out and placed into nursery ponds with plants and artificial fertilizer. As the fish grew bigger, hatchery workers fed the bass small fish such as minnows.¹¹

The Bureau relied on a vast distribution network to send out what fish they could raise. Five Pullman cars decked out with insulated compartments and air compressors for

¹⁰ James A. Henshall, *Book of the Black Bass, Comprising Its Complete Scientific and Life History, Together with a Practical Treatise on Angling and Fly Fishing and a Full Description of Tools, Tackle and Implements* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke & Co, 1881), 379–380.

¹¹ H. S. Davis, *Experiments in the Culture of the Black Bass and Other Pondfish*, United States. Bureau of Fisheries. Document No. 1085 (Washington: United States Government Print Office, 1930).

oxygenating water travelled some 120,000 miles a year distributing fish to waiting hands at railroad stations across the country. From there, the fish traveled by car or truck in stacked fish pails to their distribution points. In some states, fish trucks outfitted with one large oxygenated tank took fish from the railroad depot to the stocking area, where a worker attached a hose to the truck's tank and released a stream of fish. In remote areas, horses or mules delivered sealed metal barrels of fish to their final destinations.¹²

Bass thrived under the technologies of transportation that collapsed space in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by using the railroads, cars, trucks, and roads to expand into new territory far beyond their native range. However, their rise to national domination would come in the wake of sweeping changes to the natural landscape that proved destructive for many other species. New ecological niches opened for the bass when Americans kicked off an era of dam building.

Fish in a Dam Nation

Based on water movement alone, the history of the twentieth-century United States might be written as the stilling of moving waters. In the 1931, the first explosions for Hoover Dam signaled the start of a manic wave of dam building across the West and South. The most impressive dams—the Hoover, Grand Coulee, Shasta, and Bonneville—became works of national civic pride, public works on previously unimaginable scales.

¹² The US Bureau of Fisheries supplied many private individuals and states with fish for stocking, and shortage was due to the difficulties of raising bass. In contrast to trout that could be raised in tanks of running water to simulate river spawning, the nest-building bass needed an acre of pond water to produce at best 100,000 relatively defenseless fry or 10,000 three to four-inch fingerling fish for release. The Bureau had less than 200 acres of pond space. See E. C. Fearnow, *Stocking Interior Waters of the United States*, United States. Bureau of Fisheries. Fishery Circular no. 8 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 3–11.

The Grand Coulee held back a reservoir thirty stories high; the concrete used in the dam would still be hardening today without the aid of cooling pipes. New Deal programs on the west coast stuffed the mighty Colorado into Lake Mead; eastward, the Tennessee Valley Authority made electricity deliverable to millions by harnessing the power of the Tennessee River and its tributaries.¹³

While the big dams of the New Deal loom large in public memory and recognition, tens of thousands of other dams with obscure names also made an impact on the lives of millions. While the era of big dam projects took place under the New Deal, the years afterward were equally active. Out of the over 74,000 dams in the United States, 60% were completed between 1950 and 1979.¹⁴

Wresting a free-flowing river behind a manageable dam wreaks havoc on native ecosystems, whatever the dam's size. To a river, the building of a dam means nothing less than what one journalist describes as a "cataclysmic event." Damming alters ecosystems on innumerable levels, ranging from the obvious—the creation of large reservoirs—to the microscopic. The concrete barriers alter ancient flows of water, nutrients, sediment, and organisms.

In place of running waters, dams create reservoirs that act as heat sinks, absorbing solar energy. Like a bucket of water left outside on a hot summer day, the water heats up on the surface. In contrast, deeper water is insulated from solar heat and stays cool.

¹³ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 158–161; J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, Reprint (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 157, 177.

¹⁴ "NID National," National Inventory of Dams, Army Corps of Engineers, accessed July 14, 2013, <http://geo.usace.army.mil/pgis/f?p=397:5:0::NO>.

Because dams release water from below, the downstream river runs colder than before the dam's installation. Water temperatures then, both rise and fall with damming. Below the reservoir's surface, decomposition of flooded forests deprive the water of oxygen. Fish keenly adapted for freeflowing waters by millions of years of evolution cannot survive the drastic changes made to their environment. For many riverine fish species, the coming of a dam leads to their species' extinction or sharp decline. Damming poses one of the key threats to freshwater biodiversity.¹⁵

To tease out but one factor—sediment deposition—out of thousands on a single species, consider the plight of salmon in Oregon's McKenzie River. In order to protect human settlements on the river's floodplains, the Army Corps of Engineers built the Cougar Dam and the Blue River Dam in the 1960s. In comparison to pre-dam days, the dams halved the river's peak discharge rates—the volume of water carried by the river—preventing the waters from pouring over riverbanks during storms. Before the dams' construction, the McKenzie flowed through multiple channels as flood events deposited sediment in the middle of waterways. Under high water volume, rivers flow faster. Fast flowing waters churn up river bottoms and banks, prying off pieces of the riverbank in chunks ranging from boulder size to gravel and silt, carrying the materials downstream. When the river slows down, it loses the ability to carry heavy loads, and deposits these large rocks and boulders in the streambed. Water hits these deposited objects and slows down, further reducing the speed of the river. The slowed waters deposit smaller sediments, including silt and gravel, leading to large islands in the middle rivers, and over

¹⁵ Catherine Reidy Liermann et al., "Implications of Dam Obstruction for Global Freshwater Fish Diversity," *BioScience* 62, no. 6 (June 2012): 539–540.

time, rivers take on a braided appearance with multiple islands diverting water into channels.¹⁶

Under the dam flood regime, the McKenzie no longer experiences these high-flow, high-energy events. Because no large boulders get scraped from riverbanks, no new islands form to slow the flow of the river. Instead, the river flows at a fairly constant flow speed, cutting through preexisting islands and coalescing the braided channel into one deep channel. For the salmon, the changes in this single variable of stream speed can prove disastrous. Salmon rely on flood events to erode rocks into gravel, and on the river's islands to decrease water speed to create gravel beds. Salmon cannot create nests in extremely rocky areas, nor can they create beds in soft silted areas. The gravel beds created by uncontrolled flooding present one key factor in their viability as a species. The McKenzie today supports only half the population of salmon that it did before the construction of the dams.¹⁷

The effect of this one factor of sediment deposition does not consider the myriad other effects of dams on fish populations. Salmon get sucked into hydroelectric turbines, insect population go extinct when the leaves they depend on for food no longer wash downstream. For many fish species, damming means that they cannot reach spawning grounds to reproduce. Plant populations reliant on river fluctuation drown or desiccate. In the wake of damming, man-made reservoirs take the place of rivers and lands, while the ecological, chemical, and biological dynamics of the downstream river fundamentally

¹⁶ Ted Gup, "Dammed From Here to Eternity," *Trout*, Winter 1994, 14–20.

¹⁷ Franklin K. Ligon, William E. Dietrich, and William J. Trush, "Downstream Ecological Effects of Dams," *BioScience* 45, no. 3 (March 1995): 184–186.

change. These changes create new ecological niches that favor species adaptable to the new environment.

In contrast to salmon and other species adapted for the river environment, largemouth bass thrive in the calm water found in dam reservoirs. Like other generalist flora and fauna, dam regimes favor the tough, hardy bass. As voracious generalists, bass will consume everything from insects and crustaceans to fish, small mammals, and baby ducklings. Given a chance to feed, bass inhale their food wholesale, as often out of fight, protectiveness, or boredom as out of hunger. Tolerant of a range of salinities, temperatures, and turbidities, the largemouth can thrive anywhere from muddy agricultural ditches and former strip mines to large reservoirs. The national wave of dam building destroyed the habitat of many fish species, but from the processes of destruction came tens of thousands of acres of magnificent bass habitat.¹⁸

By the end of the 1960s, the century of territory expansion made the bass ubiquitous in American freshwaters. From the massive reservoirs that supported entire regions and metropolises to tiny agricultural ponds and golf course water hazards, the largemouth bass had quietly taken over major swaths of the American landscape, setting the stage for a new sport to emerge. In the economic boom years following the Second World War, working Americans secured greater economic prosperity and with it, more leisure time than any generation that came before it. Many of them chose to spend those

¹⁸ William F. Sigler, *Fishes of the Great Basin: A Natural History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1987), 325.

leisure hours at the new reservoirs, spending their leisure time and disposable income fishing for bass.

When bass angling began coalescing into a sport at the end of the 1960s, anglers fished on a landscape of what historian William Cronon has famously called second nature, manmade environments predicated on a series of technological interventions that made their sport possible. Bass fishing as a recreational sport arose not out of pristine wilderness or the protections thereof, but of a cultivated, engineered landscape that took immense amounts of intervention and effort to maintain. Rarely did anglers call on less intervention, but rather more, and more thoughtful intervention. Protection and regulation, not wilderness, would become the focus of their efforts.¹⁹

¹⁹ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), xix.

THE ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE BASS ANGLERS SPORTSMAN SOCIETY (B.A.S.S.)

“He’s as unpredictable as a ping-pong ball dropped in a room filled with mouse traps. He’s more violent than the Weathermen and sneakier than a campaigning politician. He’s more critical of equipment than Ralph Nader and has the table manners of a half starved hog. He comes in all sizes from difficult to downright impossible. What is it? Why, he’s a BASS, and I love him!”

—Letter to the Editor, *Bassmaster Magazine*, 1972²⁰

As former B.A.S.S. fishing tournament director Harold Sharp tells the story, bass anglers forced the government to create the Environmental Protection Agency. In Sharp’s telling, a flurry of lawsuits filed against polluters pressured the federal government into protecting the environment:

[T]hese cases were eventually settled by the State Governments stating they didn’t have jurisdiction in these cases, it belonged to the Federal Government. We replied that if the Federal Government would handle it, we would withdraw our lawsuits. Soon the Federal Government organized the EPA and we claimed credit for starting EPA.²¹

On the surface, the idea that a bunch of bass anglers got together and forced the government to create the EPA seems like a classic fisherman’s story where catching a minnow turns into catching a whale. Yet, these stories, told with a wink and a backslap, reveal how this group of conservationists expected the government to function and work for them, and their pride in protecting the waterways.

²⁰ *Bassmaster Magazine*, January/February 1972, 74; the writer likely used the all caps for emphasis rather than abbreviation.

²¹ “The Chattanooga Bass Club and Bass Anglers Sportsmans Society,” Bass Fishing Archives, posted March 6, 2013, <http://bassfishingarchives.com/sharp-recalls/the-chattanooga-bass-club-and-bass-anglers-sportsmans-society#more-4567>.

This section explores the origins and early actions of the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.), arguing that as bass fishing coalesced into its modern form as a popular sport in the 1970s, the sport's leading voices blended contemporary environmental concerns such as water pollution, poaching, and invasive species with older traditions of conservation to create a code of sportsmanship predicated on environmental awareness and management. By linking bass fishing with the political issues of the modern environmental movement including pesticide use and industrial pollution, B.A.S.S. translated major environmental issues into a framework accessible to their constituency of white, middle-aged men. While this is not the demographic normally associated with 1970s environmentalist action, taking B.A.S.S. seriously as an environmental broadens the contours of the environmental movement as one that resonated across geographic and political boundaries.

Unlike earlier generations of conservationists that sought to protect vast tracts of land solely for the protection of the species inside, bass anglers saw their sport intertwined with the modern industrialized world. Their sport relied on extensive landscape and ecological modification through dams and stocking. This relationship between the built environment and the sport of bass fishing positioned the sport to bridge the chasm between preserving recreational areas and the issues of the new environmentalism movement. B.A.S.S.'s twin goals of "clean water and better bass fishing," then, located their favorite fishing holes within modern society, rather than set

apart from it. They campaigned for waterways protected, regulated, and bettered by the human touch, not untrammelled by men.²²

The issues bass anglers took to heart in the 1970s make sense only when viewed in conjunction with the natural history of the fish they caught. As demonstrated in the previous section, bass anglers rely on an engineered environment with significant human inputs and management to practice their sport. Unlike trout streams or salmon rivers that suffer tremendous ecological declines under human management, bass reservoirs only exist *because* of human intervention. The strain of environmentalism that emerges from bass fishing thus finds more in common with the environmental problems associated with the urban ills of litter and industrial pollution than it does with those of wilderness preservation. Bass anglers advocated for more management and regulation by state and federal governments, not less.

The first half of this section outlines the motivation behind the founding of B.A.S.S. and summarizes some of the major political battles fought by the organization. In the second half, I examine B.A.S.S.'s conservation ethics as a model of conservation sportsmanship that allowed bass anglers to see themselves as responsible environmentalists without participating in other social movements of the 1970s.

Founding B.A.S.S.

For bass to find their constituency, bass anglers had to find each other. In 1968, bass angling had become popular across the country given their national distribution and

²² Bob Barker, "Update: The Bass Angler and Conservation," *Bassmaster Magazine*, March/April 1978, 25-26.

the forced conversion of anglers of other species into bass anglers when dam projects ruined habitat for other fishes. Ray Scott, a tall, charming Alabaman with a magnetic personality and a trademark white cowboy hat became to the sport of bass fishing who Bill France, Sr. was to NASCAR: a charismatic leader who organized the modern form of the sport. Scott, an inveterate salesman, realized that bass anglers needed an affinity group to coalesce their numbers, and that the sport could be marketed to a large audience. In 1968, he began progressing toward both goals, starting a professional bass fishing tournament in Rogers, Arkansas and also creating the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.). Both took off. The fishing tournament would later turn into the Bassmaster Classic, the “Super Bowl of Fishing” now televised on ESPN each year. B.A.S.S. grew quickly: within a decade, the group numbered over a quarter-million anglers who received for their membership fees an embroidered patch, free tackle, access to telephone hotlines on the hottest bass sites, and a subscription to the glossy *Bassmaster* magazine.

Scott both shaped the sport and imposed his vision on it. He ran B.A.S.S. as both an advocacy group and a private corporation, off of which he made tens of millions of dollars. Decades later, he explained the relationship between himself and B.A.S.S. to the *Washington Post*: “The Bass Angler Sportsman Society is a manifestation of my personality and motivation. I don’t say it boastfully, but I am BASS [sic].” Scott’s assessment of his role in B.A.S.S., if grandiose, reflects his major role in the sport.²³

The rise of bass as the national recreational fish came concurrently with increased environmental awareness, and like many other Americans, bass anglers came to

²³ Angus Phillips, “Anglers Are Hooked on Bassmaster: Fishing Circuit a Success, but Founder Scott is Out,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 1998.

environmental consciousness not through major events, people, or publications, but because of their lived everyday experiences. Nearly from the founding of B.A.S.S., Scott envisioned harnessing the powers of anglers to enact environmental reforms and advocate for better fishing. Scott came of age fishing on a polluted Alabama River, where he could “count condoms as they floated down the river” when the fishing went slowly. He and his fishing buddies once counted over forty in one day. Improving fishing also meant addressing problems of industrial pollution and urban sewage. In this respect, Scott’s experience is similar to that of suburbanites across the country that came to environmental consciousness as a result of seeing their local environments sullied by frothing streams and lawns covered with septic tank effluvia.²⁴

Political Battles

Founding the EPA?

A *Bassmaster* cartoon run in 1972 illustrated the mounting problems anglers such as Scott saw in their streams and lakes. A young boy with a cane pole tells an adult angler, “Watcha mean, ‘worms’? These fish got so much junk soaked up, you can catch ‘em with a magnet!” At the end of the boy’s fishing line was a horseshoe magnet with a fish stuck to it, reflecting the extent of polluted waterways. The issue of industrial

²⁴ See Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). “B.A.S.S.: More Than a Tournament Organization Part Two,” Bass Fishing Archives, posted September 21, 2012, <http://bassfishingarchives.com/features/b-a-s-s-more-than-a-tournament-organization-part-two>.

pollution with waterways served as a major focal point of B.A.S.S.'s early political actions, and became a cornerstone of their environmentalist self-perception.²⁵

In 1970, B.A.S.S. filed hundreds of lawsuits across the South on behalf of their then-90,000 members, suing both the federal government's Army Corps of Engineers and the businesses that received discharge licenses from the Corps. The organization cited the Refuse Act of 1899 that regulated the discharge of materials into navigable waters, and argued that the licenses had been issued improperly and should be revoked. The lawsuits eventually drew mainstream media attention, though the *Washington Post* suggested that B.A.S.S. might have had an ulterior motive of collecting part of the estimated \$535,000 per day fine that would result if their lawsuits succeeded.²⁶

From a legal standpoint, none of the lawsuits made progress in terms of actual changes in law. The 1899 law was narrowly written, essentially giving the right to issue licenses for pollution discharge to the Army Corps of Engineers without requiring the Corps to actually issue or enforce licenses. Sympathetic judges who declared that "the destruction or impairment of our environment... is a blight upon the Nation" still dismissed the cases for lack of merit.²⁷

However, in the memory of Harold Sharp, participating in the lawsuits was nothing short of a galvanizing experience for bass anglers. Even if legal victory remained out of reach, the machinations resonated with "the anglers and many who were fed up

²⁵ *Bassmaster Magazine*, January/February 1972, 64.

²⁶ J.M. McFadden, "214 Ala. Cities, Firms, Sued as Water Polluters," *Washington Post*, July 11, 1970.

²⁷ *Bass Anglers Sportsman's Society of America and Chattanooga Bass Club v. Scholze Tannery, Inc., et al.*, Civ. A. No. 6009, United States District Court For The Eastern District Of Tennessee, Southern Division, May 17, 1971.

with the polluted water in Chattanooga [Tennessee],” and spurred community organization and activism. Chattanooga anglers put together and supported the “Peg A Polluter” program that encouraged citizens to report pollution violations to authorities.²⁸

Underlying the narrative of industrial pollution was the geographic setting for the agitation and mobilization described by Sharp. Chattanooga, after all, was a small industrial city nestled in the mountains of eastern Tennessee with the Tennessee River flowing through the city. Nature and industry were inseparable. Invariably, the industrial waste dumped into the river wound up affecting the people who recreated in and around the river. Moreover, at least some factory workers likely went bass fishing in their spare time, leading to a further entanglement of leisure time, labor, and the environment. The issues of water pollution permeated all aspects of Chattanooga life even without bass being involved. Anglers, though, only mobilized when the issue of water pollution was framed in terms of bass fishing.

The Dingell-Johnson Act

A decade after the lawsuits filed by B.A.S.S. against polluters, the organization became a key proponent for renewing the federal Dingell-Johnson Act, which provided funding for state conservation programs through a 3% federal excise tax on fishing tackle and boats with proceeds going to state conservation societies. These passed despite concerted lobbying from boat manufacturers. The Dingell-Johnson Act created strange bedfellows; BASS aligned with the interests of the Audubon Society, the National

²⁸ “The Chattanooga Bass Club and Bass Anglers Sportsmans Society,” Bass Fishing Archives.

Wildlife Federation, and other environmentalist organizations while *Bassmaster* advertisers such as Mercury Motors vociferously opposed the bill. Mercury Motors executive Joe Swift went so far as to testify that were he and Ray Scott to work together on the topic, the “committee of Ray Scott and Joe Swift...would kill each other before they got very far.”²⁹

The testimony surrounding the bill provides the clearest articulation of how the leaders of B.A.S.S. wanted their organization to be perceived, and also how they positioned themselves as an environmental organization. As the representative of “the hard core, not the [f]ringes, but the hard core” bass anglers, “the American hairy-legged fisherman and fisherlady,” Scott testified to Congress that his constituency wanted to be taxed because they “need the help this bill would give...and the resources.” Scott testified that while his own knee-jerk reaction to the bill was to oppose it, he had converted into a supporter of the bill.³⁰

Scott linked the degradation of recreational fisheries to the challenges that the environmental movement tried to address. “It has become increasingly difficult for fisheries experts to maintain and improve the quality and quantity of the fishing experience. This is due to a number of factors, including increased fishing pressure, water and air pollution, and a critical lack of funding necessary to adequately manage the

²⁹ *Dingell-Johnson--Pittman- Robertson Acts: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation and the Environment of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, House of Representatives, Ninety-Seventh Congress, First Session, on Dingell-Johnson Act Amendments--H.R. 2250, July 8, 1981* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1982), 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 131, 45.

resource. The aquatic environments are continuing to be degraded and destroyed, while the number of anglers continues to increase.”³¹

Scott’s testimony as the president of B.A.S.S. reveals an understanding of regulation and building as a good part of government. By situating a recreational pursuit in the broader issues of the environmental movement, he positioned the organization within the context of larger battles against air and water pollution.

Building the New Sportsman

Conservationist Manhood

For most B.A.S.S. members, participation in the sport off the water likely took the form of reading *Bassmaster Magazine* and shopping for new lures rather than testifying in Congress. In the pages of the magazine, anglers found a model of conservationism that fit their politics. Through feature articles on professional anglers, scientists, and conservationists, the pages of *Bassmaster* modeled the proper behavior of how anglers—and by extension, the overwhelmingly white male audience—were supposed to act towards nature’s creatures. These articles played a didactic role in educating anglers, modeling the proper behavior for “true bass fishermen.” This form of sportsmanship figured into the broader cultural trends of the 1970s by allowing bass angling men to join the ranks of the environmental movement without aligning with other social movements impacting the nation in the 1970s. They could be good fathers without being feminists, and they could be heroic men without ascribing to the Civil Rights Movement. Whether

³¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

intentional or not, conservationist manhood that might be claimed through bass fishing could only be accessed by white males. Between the covers, *Bassmaster* showed a lily-white demographic, signaling a silent zone of exclusion. Women rarely made it into the pages of the magazine, and B.A.S.S. actively fought to keep women off the tour.

Conservationist manhood delineated who could be a sportsman by marking bass anglers as white men.

To be a good angler meant conserving not only the species, but also the sport's image. Bass anglers could not be roughnecks throwing fish like baseballs, but needed to instead nurture their catch. *Bassmaster* issued a steady beat of reminders telling anglers to be aware of their self-image and to promote their sport in the best possible light by making presentations to school groups, taking children fishing, and being sportsmen. Images such as a snow egret hanging out of a tree strangled to death by a tangle of monofilament line showed the ramifications of poor conservation practice. Anglers who polluted, poached, or overtook committed actions "criminal against nature's creatures." Conscientious anglers received their just rewards through improved fishing grounds with bountiful fish. *Bassmaster* pointed anglers to hotspots in reclaimed waterways such as the Ohio River, presenting the recovery stories almost as morality tales. The Ohio was previously unfishable due to "unchecked pollution" from nearby urban and industrial zones. When "concern for the environment brought about much needed anti-pollution regulations," the fish stocks returned, leading to a "bass bonanza." The sense of religious

salvation through bass fishing is likely intentional, given the magazine's permanent "Chaplain's Corner" column for spiritual advice.³²

B.A.S.S. yoked modern science and technology with conservation and sportsmanship, regularly calling for improved funding and donations to support scientific research. A string of articles spotlighted joint efforts between state conservation departments and anglers that let anglers assist serious research while fishing by tagging fish or measuring oxygen levels in lakes and rivers. Conservation alerts warned that prime fishing areas such as Florida's Apalachicola River could be used as industrial corridors after escaping pollution and damming, and called on anglers to tell their legislators "loud and clear" that bass anglers wanted the river protected.

B.A.S.S. also raised concerns over invasive plant species, framing these threats as "diabolic menace[s] to [the] future of bass fishing." The menace came not just from the plants themselves that could kill bass by lowering oxygen levels in waterways, but also from bungled management practices that came from unsupervised state actions. In their campaign against the purple hyacinth plant, B.A.S.S. warned anglers that the state of Florida's waterway managers were using pesticides in waterways to control the plants without alerting anglers beforehand. B.A.S.S. called on anglers to monitor spraying so that "bureaucrats [would] realize there [was] someone looking over their shoulder." The threat to the environment came not only from the invasive species, but also from the toxins that could hurt people. Here then, B.A.S.S. linked the goals of earlier

³² Max Hunn, "Discarded Mono: A Hangman's Noose," *Bassmaster Magazine*, November/December 1978, 2; Mark Hicks, "The Ohio River's Bass Bonanza," *Bassmaster Magazine*, January 1977, 25.

conservationists who wanted to preserve physical spaces with the goals of modern environmentalists that fought against widespread threats to human health.³³

In this configuration of science and government, bass anglers expected local, state, and federal governments to work for their interests. Governmental failure came when no one monitored them. The landscapes anglers treasured needed the science and technology of the state to function as bass habitat.

Cultural Precedents

B.A.S.S. drew from a cultural well of sportfishing ethics set after the Civil War to reformulate sportsmanship. Robert Roosevelt's *Superior Fishing*, for example, included a number of guidelines regarding who could claim the title of sportsman. In contrast to the "unrefined" market fisherman, sportsmen followed guidelines embedded with connotations of human social hierarchy. The angler, taught Roosevelt, "should never forget that he is a sportsman, and owes the duties of moderation, humanity, patience, and kindness under all circumstances; that he cannot slaughter or poach... he should ever be the gentleman." In addition to the qualities of sportsmanship that an angler needed to embody, an angler also followed rules about what he could or could not do in order to catch his prey. A man who used a worm on a "beautiful trout" was not a sportsman, and

³³ Max Hunn, "Florida's Threatened Apalachicola River," *Bassmaster Magazine*, March/April 1977, 6; Max Hunn, "Hydrilla: Diabolic Menace to [the] Future of Bass Fishing," *Bassmaster Magazine*, May/June 1977, 10–12; Max Hunn, "It's War Against the Purple Pest," *Bassmaster Magazine*, September/October 1977, 14–16.

did so at “great risk to his reputation.” Roosevelt’s guidelines by definition disqualified all but the socially elite who could claim the terms gentleman and sportsman.³⁴

Roosevelt’s strict guidelines for sportsmen extended to fish themselves. Bass qualified as a gamefish worthy of a sportman’s attention because the fish “require[d] the best of tackle and skill in its inveiglement, and exhibits courage and game qualities of the highest order.” In contrast, fish such as the “savage pickerel, immense mascallonge [muskellunge], and gigantic catfish” displayed cowardice by laying “in wait amid long weeds, and embedded in deep mud, a terror to their smaller brethren.” To be classified as a game fish, a fish needed to display the qualities of a fair, clean-fighting opponent even with other fish. The unsporting nature of those fish, according to Roosevelt, extended to the “unrefined fisherman who looks to the profit to be derived from their heavy carcasses.” Anyone who fished for the marketplace could not be proper sportsman.³⁵

Catch and Release and “True Bass Fishermen”

Central to the idea of bass sportsmanship was the practice of catch-and-release fishing, as opposed to catch-and-keep fishing. Even at a small tournament with a few dozen competitors, competitors in early bass fishing tournaments presented strings of dead and dying bass to weigh-ins that added up to hundreds of large, dead bass—hardly the image of responsibility. In 1972, Ray Scott announced that B.A.S.S. was “pioneer[ing] a new conservation innovation,” the “Don’t Kill Your Catch” program that encouraged tournament anglers to release their fish alive after weigh-ins. Bassmaster

³⁴ Roosevelt, *Superior Fishing*, 17-18.

³⁵ Roosevelt, *Superior Fishing*, 9-10.

tournaments incentivized the concept by using a bonus system for fish released alive that potentially meant the difference between going home empty-handed or winning \$15,000 prizes.³⁶

The “Don’t Kill Your Catch Program” also extended to asking recreational anglers to release their catches. *Bassmaster* readers that true bass anglers would “catch a good fish, admire it, weigh it and then lean over the boat and gently release the fish,” rather than taking it home for trophies. Scott repositioned fishing’s greatest thrill from the fish submitting to the angler to the moment of releasing a catch back to nature alive; it was a transformation from a moment of death to a transcendentalist experience of giving life. “[T]he complete thrill of bass fishing,” he wrote, was experienced only by anglers who let “a big bass slowly swim off out of sight beneath the boat.”³⁷

In truth, Scott never believed that tournament anglers affected bass populations to any great extent, but used the spectacle of releasing bass at tournaments to quiet “grouchy old timer[s] in bib overalls” who complained that B.A.S.S. tournaments ruined their fishing. Promoting catch and release fishing served as a way of reforming the public reputation of bass fishing into a sport that tread lightly on the planet, while mitigating real fears that the fish caught were no longer safe to eat due to pollutant bioaccumulation. Adopting the catch and release ethos transformed bass fishing from a blood sport into a benign, wholesome outdoor activity where even the fish got to go home at the end of the

³⁶ Ibid., 12. In 1997, angler Dalton Bobo lost the \$100,000 first place Bassmaster Classic prize when he received a four-ounce penalty for a dead bass. He lost the tournament by one ounce. Grigsby and Coram, *Bass Master Shaw Grigsby*, 24.

³⁷ Ray Scott, “Scott on the Line,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, January/February 1972, 12.

day. Like the Leave No Trace philosophy later adopted by hikers, catch and release fishing supposedly left the waterways free of angler imprints.³⁸

To model the seemingly unnatural behavior of catch and release, *Bassmaster* found heroes in anglers such as guide Doug Hannon, who told readers that “the best reason for releasing a bass is the pure pleasure it gives you. If you don’t comprehend this thrill, you’re not a true bass fisherman.” Hannon described the feeling: “It makes my veins feel like fish are jumping in them when I turn one of the lunkers loose.” Pictured in the article were photographs of Hannon holding up massive ten-pound bass that any angler would be proud of. A feature story on one Florida club touted the elite membership of the “Let Your Lunker Live!” club at a Florida lake that awarded a patch to members who caught a bass of at least seven pounds and released it alive. By focusing on both professional anglers and the best local anglers, the magazine tried to popularize catch and release methods by showing that it was acceptable to release prize catches without being less of an angler-man, and that releasing the fish in fact made one a truer sportsman.³⁹

While catch and release arguably had very little effect as far as ecology—after all, bass were a prolific, well-established species—its greater effect might have been in how it reformulated gender expectations. Although Ray Scott had borrowed the concept of catch and release from trout anglers, he did not acknowledge the fact for some time. He

³⁸ Robert H. Boyle, *Bass Boss: The Inspiring Story of Ray Scott and the Sport Fishing Industry He Created* (Pintlala, AL: Whitetail Trail Press, 1999), 163. For more on the Leave No Trace ethos, see James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Environmental History* 7, no. 3 (July 2002): 462–484.

³⁹ Max Hunn, “Let Your Lunker Live!,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, September/October 1976, 8–9; W. Horace Carter, “Unique Guide to Trophy Bass,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, January 1978, 28, 81.

later told a biographer that he adopted the concept when he saw trout anglers decked out in vests and rubber waders releasing their catch, thinking that “if they had so much fun releasing this piddlin’ little trout, what would it be like if a big, hairy-legged bass fisherman released a five-pound bass?” The tone explicitly contrasts bass anglers as manly and hairy, catching man-sized fish, compared with effeminate trout fishermen and their tiny catch. Read as a reaction to major national cultural and political changes, the adoption of catch and release among bass anglers becomes an avenue for bass angling men to selectively adopt certain aspects of the environmental movement within a space that was almost exclusive white and male.⁴⁰

Gently handling a bass and making sure it survived put men in the role of ecological protectors of the species with a paternalistic attitude towards the fish themselves. One how-to article on how one should treat bass described the fish as “delicate fellows, despite their tactics of slamming like fast freight trains” with their “power ploys, bulldog tactics, and leaps amidst showering sprays of water.” A caption intoned: “Don’t throw bass back into the lake as if they were baseballs!” Instead, anglers needed to “carefully drop... [the fish] gently back into the water,” or to cradle the fish underwater until the fish swam away. Seeing bass as “delicate fellows” marked a significant departure from game fishing, where the point of catching a fish was for an angler to demonstrate mastery over a fish by fighting it until it submitted to the angler’s

⁴⁰ Boyle, *Bass Boss*, 163. Enforcement of bass angling spaces as white male spaces could be quite direct: when one highly skilled female angler tried to enter a bass tournament, Ray Scott reportedly tore up her check in front of her, telling her that it would “be cold day in hell before a woman ever fishe[d]” a Bassmaster tournament. Ken Schultz, *Bass Madness: Bigmouths, Big Money, and Big Dreams at the Bassmaster Classic* (Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 238–239.

will. Under catch and release, bass were no longer equal competitors with anglers, but instead “delicate fellows” who needed the guidance and support of skillful anglers. Conservationist manhood allowed men to retain their roles as social protectors while allowing them to show a gentle touch in handling fish by formulating gentle handling as a sign of skillfulness and mastery.⁴¹

Bass fishing, then, played a social function by preserving a social space set aside for white men at a time when women and minorities integrated public spaces and workplaces. By working within the boundaries of what one writer described as a “crusty bassin’ man’s world,” the “hairy-legged” bass anglers found a social niche where their conservationist actions towards bass would not be read as a sign of softness, but rather as a signifier of manly competence. “Hairy-legged” men explicitly contrasts bass anglers with both women and with feminized men and retains the space of bass angling as a space for unadulterated authentic manhood. Within the context of the environmental movement, the conservationist manhood accessed through bass fishing allowed anglers who likely identified more with Merle Haggard’s “Okie From Muskogee” than with Greenpeace activists to retain their sense of law, order, and traditional masculinity within a feminized and queered environmental movement.⁴²

⁴¹ Don Shiner, “How to Handle Bass,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, March/April 1977, 28–32.

If catch and release epitomized the sportsman, his opposite was the poacher, someone who killed everything he caught for personal gain. Writers cast the poacher as the mortal enemy of the sportsmen, directly violating ethical conduct toward fish and man alike, wantonly destroying the future instead of nurturing it. *Bassmaster* regularly highlighted anti-poaching efforts that saved potential “prize trophy bass for sportsmen yet unborn” by deterring “illicit meat hunters intent upon fast profits at the expense of sportsmen.” Law enforcement figures, legitimate and not, became the defenders of sportsmen’s rights, which inverts the classic formulation of the hunter or angler pulling a fast one on law enforcement. One article in the anti-poaching vein profiled Cindy Delaney and John Kennedy, an undercover joint team of a federal Fish and Wildlife agent and a State of North Carolina wildlife management officer who performed a fourteen-month undercover sting operation of North Carolina poachers who sold their catch to local retailers as species of food fish. Despite a depressive economic climate, North Carolina wildlife officials insisted that poaching was a serious crime, rather than a response to poverty. Another feature article profiled Justin Morgan, essentially a volunteer game commission vigilante who patrolled Florida lakes for poachers. Pictured

⁴² Country singer-songwriter Brad Paisley makes this point in his 2008 hit single “I’m Still a Guy” (Arista Nashville, 2008). In the song, the narrator describes the feminization of men in the cultural moment of metrosexuality as a neutering experience in part because it shows that they cannot perform manly feats such as fishing. The song’s narrator tells his female companion:

These days there’s dudes getting facials,
Manicured, waxed and botoxed,
With deep spray-on tans and creamy lotion hands,
You can’t grip a tackle box.

Yeah with all of these men linin’ up to get neutered,
It’s hip now to be feminized.
But I don’t highlight my hair, I’ve still got a pair
Yeah honey, I’m still a guy.

in dark sunglasses talking on a radio next to his Jeep, Morgan gave off the look of a foe to be reckoned with. Morgan was portrayed as a one-man unit fighting poachers, a “sincere conservationist” with a “dedicated desire to halt the illicit poaching of wildlife” who ran off “outlaw fishermen” with shotguns. Heroes like Delany, Kennedy, and Morgan stood for order and sport.⁴³

By the end of the 1970s, *Bassmaster* revealed a higher calling for bass anglers than even the preservation of law and order as the magazine ran a series featured scathing exposés on the “anti-fishing movement” that had a “master plan” that would “poison the minds of the children against fishing, hunting, and the harvesting of anything that lives.” *Bassmaster* writer Horace Carter ominously warned of the impending fall of civilization as anglers knew it, since the humanists had penetrated even the Sierra Club and the Florida Audubon Society, teaching children “to despise the type of values parents have, like thinking it is fun to go fishing, and can bring rebellion, division and disaster to the American family image.” The groups were “modernists who are spreading the poison that it is evil to catch fish for recreation,” and fundamentally tried to undermine the “sense of values of the world” by teaching children that fishing was a “perversion.” Carter prepared readers for a long war against them. “Humanists,” he declared, “have patience, like Communists.”

Sportsmen, then, were the last line of defense against species extinction, water pollution, government foul ups, and traditional American values. “Had not the sportsman appeared to save the American creatures of nature,” opined Carter, “there would be

⁴³ W. Horace Carter, “Crusader Stalks Poachers,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, May/June 1978, 55–57; W. Horace Carter, “Poacher Police,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, November/December 1979, 48–51.

none.” In a world of social upheaval, sportsmen were the endangered species, waylaid by modernity and voiceless in government. Anglers needed to protect children from these dangers as early as possible. B.A.S.S. suggested a litany of ways for bass anglers to inculcate children from the humanist influence: suggestions included taking one’s own children fishing, taking other people’s children fishing, demonstrating fishing at schools, and buying fishing books and magazines for libraries. B.A.S.S. was especially concerned with ensuring that educators would not become “unwilling pawns for the anti [fishing]-movement.”⁴⁴

Whatever the motivations behind this (seemingly paranoid) series of articles, it gave bass anglers a place in society where they stood on the side of nation, tradition, and family values. Contextualizing bass anglers as the heirs of a long tradition of American conservation made it positively un-American to be anti-environment. Serious bass anglers had a national duty to fish as sportsmen. The argument could appeal to white men who might have felt displaced by deindustrialization or threatened by the gains of minority groups in the 1970s could respond by fishing. Conservation could be conservative.

⁴⁴ W. Horace Carter, “Beware: The Anti-Fishing Movement is Growing,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, September/October 1978, 43–46; W. Horace Carter, “Sportmen: The Endangered Species,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, February 1979, 103-105; Bill Ignizio, “Sportsmen: The Endangered Species,” *Bassmaster Magazine*, March/April 1979, 127-130.

CONCLUSION

In October of 1978, Jimmy Carter's White House received a telegram from an amiable ex-insurance salesman from Alabama named Ray Scott, who introduced himself as the president of the largest sports fishing organization in the United States...represent[ing] nearly 3000,000 fishermen dedicated to the realistic conservation of our nations [sic] water resources." The membership of the ten-year-old organization dwarfed the membership numbers of the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club combined. B.A.S.S. translated the environmental movement into language that resonated for sportsmen.⁴⁵

The casual observer of bass fishing today sees little of the environmentalist motivations behind bass fishing described here. B.A.S.S. was bought out in 1987 by one of Ray Scott's business associates. In 2001, the organization was again sold, this time to the cable television sports giant ESPN. With each turn, B.A.S.S. cast off more of its conservationists roots. The B.A.S.S. website today no longer makes any mention of conservation issues, which were featured so prominently as part of the membership drives of the 1970s.⁴⁶

The B.A.S.S. of the 1970s was a significantly different organization than the one we see today. By presenting these conservation efforts in language accessible to anglers, B.A.S.S. made conservation and environmentalism a worthwhile goal among people who

⁴⁵ In 1979, the Wilderness Society had 48,000 members while the Sierra Club had 181,000 members. Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 236; Ray Scott to Jimmy Carter, October 22, 1978, "Ray Scott" folder, WHGH Name File, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁴⁶ By the late 1990s, B.A.S.S. no longer used periods in-between the letters, and became simply BASS.

might normally not consider themselves part of the environmental movement. Through the language of fishing, B.A.S.S. attempted to address many of the environmental issues plaguing Americans.

The sport of bass fishing is familiar to the millions of Americans who watch the Bassmaster Classic on ESPN each year. Most might be surprised of the environmentalist framework adopted early on by the sport's largest membership organization, the Bass Anglers Sportsman's Society. This essay argues that as bass fishing coalesced into its modern form as a popular sport in the 1970s, the sport's leading voices blended contemporary environmental concerns such as water pollution, poaching, and invasive species with older traditions of conservation to create a code of sportsmanship predicated on environmental awareness that resonated. Recognizing B.A.S.S. as an environmental organization broadens the contours of the environmental movement as one that resonated across geographic and political boundaries. This essay demonstrates that bass anglers situated their sport within the context of conservation. By linking bass fishing with environmental issues such as water pollution, conservation, poaching, and invasive species, B.A.S.S. translated major environmental issues into a framework accessible by their constituency, contributing a serious conservationist strain that remains in the sport today.

In his 1998 book *Bass Master Shaw Grigsby: Notes on Fishing and Life*, professional bass angler and outdoor program television host Shaw Grigsby made a passionate argument against the practice of mounting trophy bass for display:

She does not deserve the indignity of being killed and placed on a wall so that an angler can show her off to visitors. A mounted bass does not reflect the prowess

of an angler. It reveals that the angler is selfish. It reveals that the angler has forever affected the genetics of bass in the body of water where she was caught. Big bass are rare and cannot be replaced. Their genes are gone. Subsequent fish spawned from other females will be smaller.

In a few short sentences, Grigsby attacks the practice of killing and displaying fish on the grounds of sportsmanship, ecology, genetics, and conservation: hardly the attitude expected of a professional angler, but the one expected of an environmentalist.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Grigsby and Coram, *Bass Master Shaw Grigsby*, 168–169.

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