

Lake Tahoe once was a mecca for fishermen



Fishing at Lake Tahoe remains popular. Photo/LTN file

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – Despite people continually messing with the ecosystem, fishing remains a vibrant part of Lake Tahoe's allure.

In the 1800s the area was known for the abundance of fish and their size.

Native Americans knew this well before the white man came to the basin. The Indians tended to fish the streams and tributaries more than the main lake.

They used spears and other methods to catch fish. It was common to fish during spawning season. That practice ended when the white man chased them away, saying this was the worst time to fish. It was white fish and Lahontan cutthroat trout that were the main catches. Some of it was dried and traded with other tribes.

David Long, an environmental consultant, discussed the history of fishing at Lake Tahoe on Nov. 10 at the Camp Richardson Lodge as a guest speaker for the Lake Tahoe Historical

Society.

There are reports of a trio of brothers catching 165 fish in one day that was then sold to a Truckee hotel. In 1894, 40 tons of trout were caught in the first month of fishing season. During spawning season it was impossible to cross a stream without killing some fish.

William Pomin holds the record for largest cutthroat trout caught at Lake Tahoe – 31½ pounds in 1911. Robert Aronsen on June 21, 1974, caught the record lake trout – 31 pounds, 6 ounces; Kokanee salmon record was set by William Bush on July 20, 2013 – 5 pounds, 2 ounces.

Mining and timber severely impacted the fishing at Lake Tahoe. Streams were degraded as trout nests were disturbed by the lumber practices at the time. Temporary dams changed the flow of water. Fish ladders were not always built. Saw dust was thrown into the Truckee River.

Long said the introduction of most of the nonnative species was to help grow bigger fish, to enhance the food web. For the most part the opposite happened.

The crayfish are one of many creatures in Lake Tahoe that are not native. They were introduced in the 1800s.

“The unintended consequence is the crayfish ate the fish eggs more efficiently than the fish ate the crayfish,” Long said.

In 1916 Lahontan cutthroat trout were still the predominant fish. But the nonnatives eventually won out and the cutthroat was eliminated by the late 1930s. There are multiple agencies working to reintroduce the cutthroat to Lake Tahoe and its tributaries, which has not been welcome by all.

California introduced rainbow trout in 1877, with Nevada doing so in 1893.

Brook trout came in 1877 or 1878.

Lake trout, or mackinaw, were introduced by Nevada in 1888. California planted them at Fallen Leaf Lake in 1894.

“It was a controversial planting,” Long explained. “California didn’t want fish eating fish. Nevada said so what.”

In 1896 Brown trout were introduced.

It was in 1917 that commercial fishing was banned at Lake Tahoe. That order was lifted a couple years ago to allow crayfish to be harvested. Sport fishing is still allowed, but the size and quantity of what’s caught has been declining.