

Girls Hooked on Fish

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CHESTERLAND, OHIO—Gorillas, tigers, and other high-profile animals tend to elicit most of the world’s sympathy for endangered species. But a much humbler species, the brook trout, has captured the hearts of a group of Ohio teens.



Evin McMullen and a government ranger collect brook trout from a local stream.

Brook trout live in small streams, lakes, and spring ponds in eastern North America. They are sometimes called speckled trout, after the red dots on their brown flanks.

“Brookies” were once abundant in the streams that run through northeastern Ohio, but rapid land development there has *threatened* them. A threatened species is one that is likely to become endangered. “Brook trout really needed a voice,” says Evin McMullen, 16, a junior at Hawken Upper School.

Fours years ago, Evin and two classmates, Angela Primbas and Amanda Weatherhead, formed Save Our Stream (SOS) to rescue the fish. “When we started SOS in middle school, we got a lot of weird looks and comments from people—‘You want to do what?’ they’d say. Socially, middle school is a jungle, but it didn’t faze me,” says Evin.

The girls educated themselves about the brook trout’s decline. “Brook trout are picky animals. They require a high standard of living—water that is clear, well-oxygenated, and cool [below 21 degrees Celsius],” says Evin.

Human encroachment has degraded the local waterways in many ways. “Parking-lot runoff was carrying warm, polluted water into the streams. And some homeowners were mowing their lawns right up to the edge of the streams, cutting down the plants that prevent soil from being flushed into the water and silting it up,” says Evin.

Overfertilization was another source of degradation. When excess fertilizer is washed into a waterway, it encourages *eutrophication*. It overloads the water with nutrients that foster an explosion of plant life and algae. “The blooms of algae rob the water of oxygen and nutrients, and when the algae die, they clog the water,” says Evin.



Brookies are an *indicator species*—their numbers are a measure of the quality of an ecosystem. “Many people here have well water, so if the brook trout can survive then the groundwater is healthy,” Evin told *Current Science*.

SOS has received more than \$35,000 in grant money, which the girls have spent educating residents and rehabilitating damaged streams. Evin and Angela also received a Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes last fall. The prize is a \$2,000 scholarship given to “outstanding young leaders who have made a significant positive difference to people and our planet.”

Better than any prize, says Evin, was the recent news that brook trout have started to rebound in the region. “The brook trout is the poster child for everything I’m fighting for,” she says.