

## HABITAT IMPROVEMENT

# Recycled trees protect Yuba fish

## 2 volunteer groups help DWR construct new lakebed habitats

By Ray Grass

Deseret News outdoor editor

Christmas trees are great for holding ornaments, but who would think they'd also make great homes? Yet that's what about 2,000 of the former holiday symbols will be used for.

Groups of anglers and fish biologists got together Saturday on the shores of Yuba Reservoir to build homes made of Christmas trees for young perch and walleye.

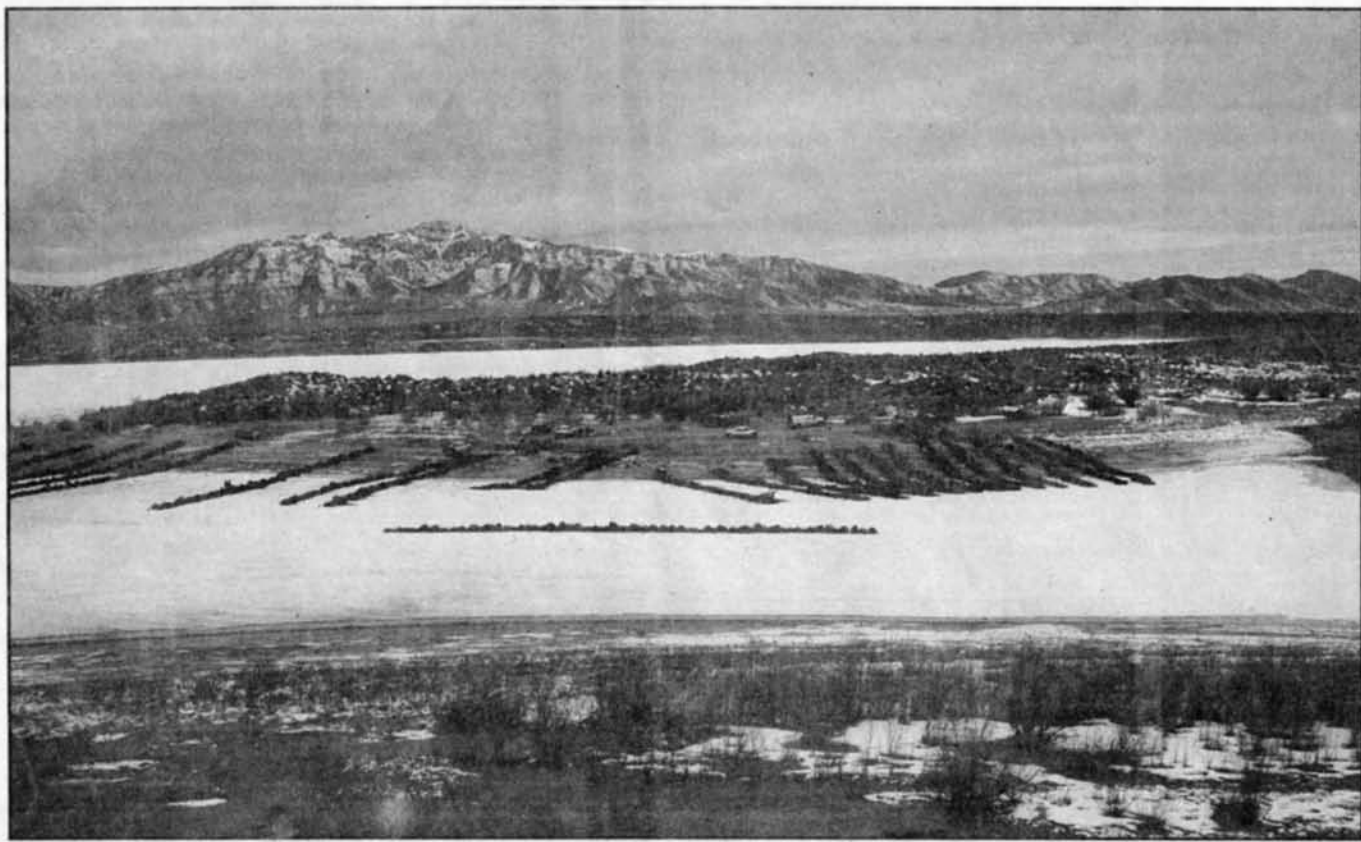
Don Wiley, new aquatic manager for the Central Region of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, said the groups provided more than 4,000 feet of new fish habitat using trees lashed together with cable. A 50-pound anchor was then attached to every 10th tree to keep the bundles on the bottom of the reservoir.

Some of the structures were left on the shore to be covered as the water level rises. Others were placed on the surface ice. As the ice melts, the trees will fall through and sink, providing a sanctuary for smaller fish.

Charlie Thompson, the recently retired chief of fisheries for the DWR's Central Region, said normally there is plenty of vegetation in reservoirs but "because of the fluctuation of the water levels (in Yuba), there is no vegetation. It's a condition that is typical of most of our reservoirs. If the (structures) prove successful as we believe they will be, then it's certainly something we'd like to continue to use in the future."

Thompson also pointed out that Yuba has, for years, been a "boom-or-bust" fishery.

What happens is that with no place for fish to hide, the big fish eat all the little ones and when the smaller fish are gone the bigger ones starve. This makes it possible for the small fish to survive until they mature, and then the cycle starts again.



Because of the lack of proper habitat, walleye and perch fishing at Yuba Reservoir has gone through extreme highs and lows.

During the best years, Yuba is one of the hottest fishing spots in Utah, if not the country. During the lean years, however, one fish a day would be considered good fishing.

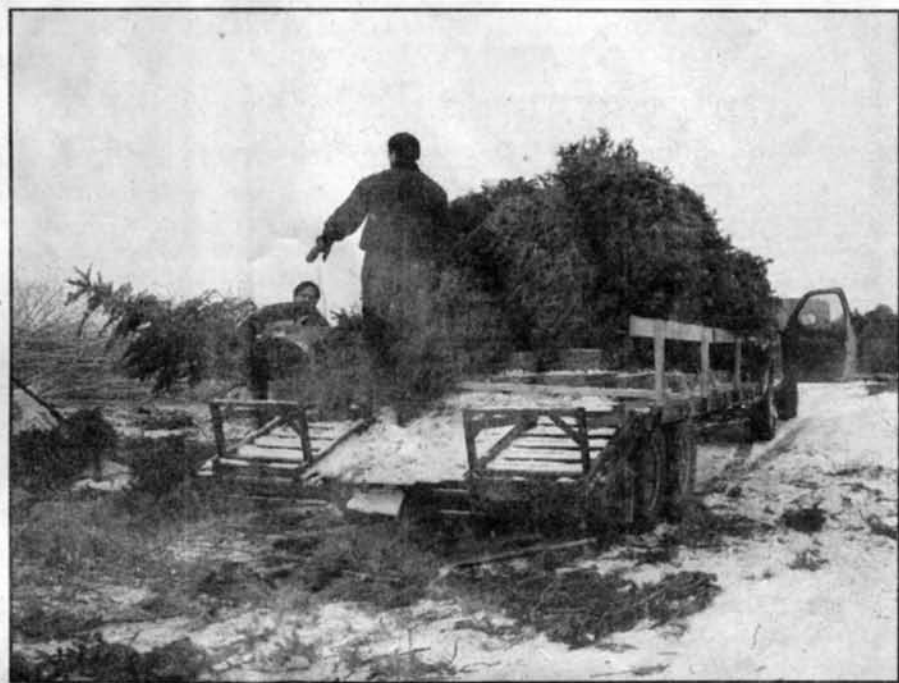
Studies by the DWR and Utah State University determined that the lack of adequate cover was one of the primary reasons behind the teeter-totter cycle. Thompson said the good fishing runs for about five years and the poor periods between 10 and 12.

Twenty-six volunteers from the Rocky Mountain Anglers and B.A.S.S., along with personnel from the DWR, completed the work Saturday.

"The one thing we want to do is encourage other anglers not to mess with the trees. This is a project that will greatly benefit the fishery," Ray Schelle, environmental officer for Rocky Mountain Anglers, said.

Last year, two different structures were placed in Yuba and a third was introduced into Deer Creek. The success of each will be monitored to determine which is the most protective.

The first was a large black plastic box that is anchored to the bottom of the reservoir. Tree limbs are placed inside the box to create artificial habitat.



Volunteers unload Christmas trees that were used to build structure for fish.

The second was a structure built from green plastic pipe that looks like a tree. Larger pipe is used to resemble the trunk of a tree, and smaller pipe is used to imitate branches.

The third was something that looked like a weighted mop head with dangling tentacles. This one, said Thompson, most mimics true fish habitat.

"They used these in a reservoir in Montana," Thompson said. "What they found was they had between 200 and 400 percent more reproduction of smaller fish around the structures than in other parts of the reservoir."

"They monitored these against all

types of underwater vegetation, and they were far superior."

A check of the structures about a week after they were placed in Deer Creek found that smallmouth bass had already moved in.

These new housing projects, however, are not cheap. The large boxes cost about \$100 each, the pipe trees about \$45 and mop heads about \$70 each. The Christmas tree project, which is considerably cheaper, received funding for three years by the Habitat Council. The program will be closely watched by the DWR.

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Christmas trees were lashed together with cable, then weighted with 50-pound anchors and placed on the ice at Yuba Reservoir.