

AFS should not develop electrofishing guidelines

J. L. Nielsen's article, "Scientific Sampling Effects: Electrofishing California's Endangered Fish Populations," (*Fisheries* 23[12]:6-12), like many others that have appeared in various outlets in recent years, highly prioritizes injury to individual fish. This may be valid with respect to low-density stocks with limited distribution such as the endangered Pacific salmon populations that are supposedly the subject of Nielsen's paper. In most situations, however, injury to individual fish would be significant only if enough individuals were affected such that the population at large was impacted.

Unfortunately, Nielsen's concern about electrofishing injury is soon expanded to wild fish populations in general, regardless of abundance or potential risk. As in many other articles that focus on injury to individual fish, the probability that most injuries can heal, enabling fish to resume "normal" lives after being sampled, receives little consideration. Studies reporting limited population-level effects are mentioned in Nielsen's review but also appear to be discounted. Nielsen recommends underwater observation (which is routinely calibrated by electrofishing) as an alternative to electrofishing but also admits that it is probably best suited to conditions characteristic of endangered fish populations (i.e., low abundance).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Nielsen's article is that the American Fisheries Society (AFS) is called on to develop guidelines and ethical policies (essentially, "rules") for governing the application and ethical use of

electrofishing by state and federal agencies. This proposal assumes that the AFS has the authority to impose such guidelines. It also assumes that all electrofishing scenarios involving numerous combinations of gear, species, conditions, objectives, etc., can and should conform to something more rigorous than an extremely general set of "guidelines." Finally, it suggests that field biologists may not properly operate their equipment and ultimately question their regard for the fishery resources they manage.

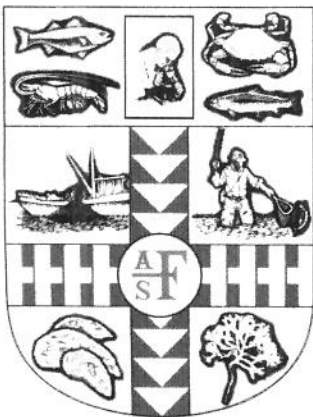
We believe the role of the AFS should be confined to providing a professional forum in which to discuss issues such as electrofishing injury and to publish peer-reviewed papers on various aspects of sampling gears and techniques. We also contend that electrofishing equipment designs and techniques that minimize injury are continually being sought and implemented. We believe most biologists are realistic and understand that all sampling activities have associated risks. Some injury (a cost) is acceptable when the risk of population-level impacts are judged to be minimal, and the information obtained facilitates better management (the benefit).

As representatives of several management agencies and as AFS members, we oppose the suggestion that AFS should attempt to produce guidelines pertaining to electrofishing or any other sampling gear or technique. Notwithstanding a lack of authority to direct the actions of any fisheries management agency, regulation of routine sampling decisions is outside the Society's scope of responsibility.

--The Southern Division Trout Committee

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