

ANGUS PHILLIPS

In Flood Waters, Fishing Is a Wash-Out

OHARPERS FERRY, W. Va. On Labor Day weekend, Mark Kovach thought he was over the hump. "You could finally see the bottom," he said. "The Potomac had a nice, green tinge to it. The Shenandoah was chalky but it was clearing, too. The fish were biting, though you still had to work for them."

After his worst summer in a decade and a half working the Potomac below its juncture with the Shenandoah as a smallmouth bass fishing guide, Kovach was primed for a glorious fall.

A few days later he got his fall all right—the amazing deluge of rainfall that accompanied the remnants of Hurricane Fran and turned both rivers into raging, milk chocolate-colored torrents, putting him back out of business before he really resumed.

"It was just starting to get right," Kovach sighed, "and along came Fran."

Last week the fly-rodder from Silver Spring with the distinctive, bushy mustache and floppy bush hat sat on the bank of the Potomac near the confluence with the Shenandoah and watched the rumbling river roll, still muddy and roaring several days after the rain stopped.

"This will take at least another 10 days to clear," he said.

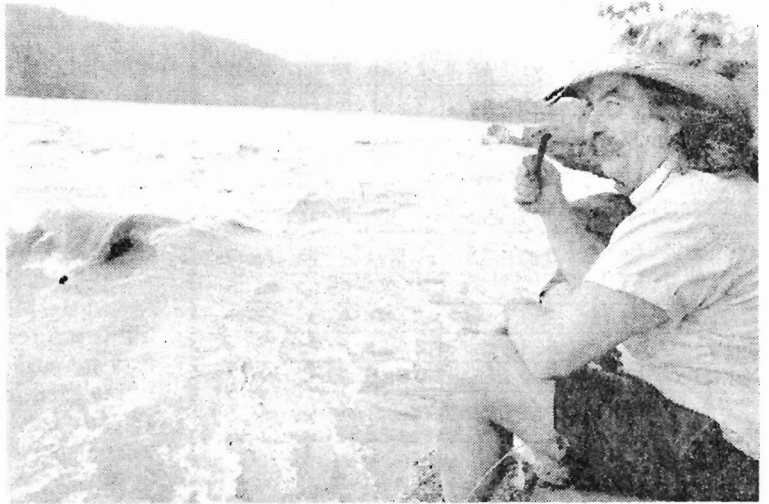
Maybe then fishing will get right.

"I'm glad I have a real job," said Kovach, who teaches automotive engineering at Montgomery College-Rockville.

Up and down the rivers from Staunton, Va., to Little Falls, Md., folks who fish for smallmouth, bluegills, catfish and crappies were singing the same sad dirge. The record-setting cool, wet summer left the Potomac and Shenandoah high, muddy and unfishable many days, and the great floods of January and September rocked the systems at both ends of the season.

"It's been a really bad year for float-fishing," said Larry Mohn, Shenandoah regional fisheries manager for the Virginia Division of Game and Inland Fisheries. "It's the coolest I've seen in my 20 years here and we had so many high-water events, the Shenandoah was discolored half the summer."

It was the same on the Potomac, where Kovach managed to run only a half-dozen trips. "I canceled people five and six times.



BY ANGUS PHILLIPS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Potomac River fishing guide Mark Kovach says conditions were so poor this summer that "I canceled people five and six times."

They had trips booked in April, we put it off to May; we canceled in May and put it off to June. A few I finally managed to get out before Labor Day."

Then came Fran. "I'm still hoping to get some people out this fall," said Kovach, who charges \$330 to take two anglers on an all-day trip, "just so I can get the cost of all my phone calls back."

Some anglers worry about long-term effects of the twin floods and the unusual summer. When the water did drop to near normal this summer, fishing was tough. Kovach said he caught about half as many bass as usual.

But experts don't expect the curious weather of 1996 to affect fishing significantly.

"This latest flood [Fran] could have killed off some young of the year in the Shenandoah," Mohn said, "but that's not catastrophic. You do lose young some years; we've seen it on the James a couple of times. I don't fear a whole lot for the smallmouth."

Indeed, Mohn sees some positive signs. Hot weather is the enemy of many river species, including bass, he said, leading to mortality when the water gets too warm. "This should have been a good growth summer with the cool, high water."

Said Bob Lunsford, Maryland's freshwater fisheries chief: "The theory that these fish would be severely damaged by floods just doesn't hold water, if you'll excuse the pun. Smallmouth are stream-bred fish; they're adapted to floods. We probably will have poor 1996 spawning success, but a failure like that is a one-in-three occurrence in warm water fishes.

It's kind of normal. On the plus side, we've had almost no fishing pressure this year."

Lunsford is concerned about potential loss of thousands of fish trapped in the C&O Canal after the Potomac rose above the towpath in both floods. River guide Ken Penrod called public attention to the entrapment, and teams from the state have been electroshocking backwaters and hauling bass, walleyes, catfish, carp, bluegills and other fish back to the river.

But Lunsford said the number of fish trapped in the canal "probably is insignificant compared to populations in the river as a whole."

Both state biologists said riverbeds have been significantly altered by the two floods and that anglers who go out this fall, if the water level ever drops, or next summer can expect favorite holes to have moved or disappeared.

Lunsford also is concerned about the revival of submerged grass beds that are gathering spots for game fish and bait in summer. Many grass beds never appeared this year as muddy water blocked sunlight the grass needs to grow.

The bottom line: Fishing has been so fluky all summer that no one really knows what to expect. But where there are hooks, there is hope.

"Hopefully," said Mark Forndorf, a defense analyst for the federal government and past president of the Potomac River Smallmouth Club, "barring more of the same, we'll go out next year and find decent fishing."