

# Fish expert looks to hook anglers

*Website for fish stories will aid U of A research*

BRENT WITTMEIER  
*Edmonton Journal*

Mark Poesch wants to hear your fish stories.

He wants to hear about the little minnow you accidentally hooked, the one that was THIS big, or those haughty, well-educated behemoths that snubbed your lure beneath the surface of that overfished stream.

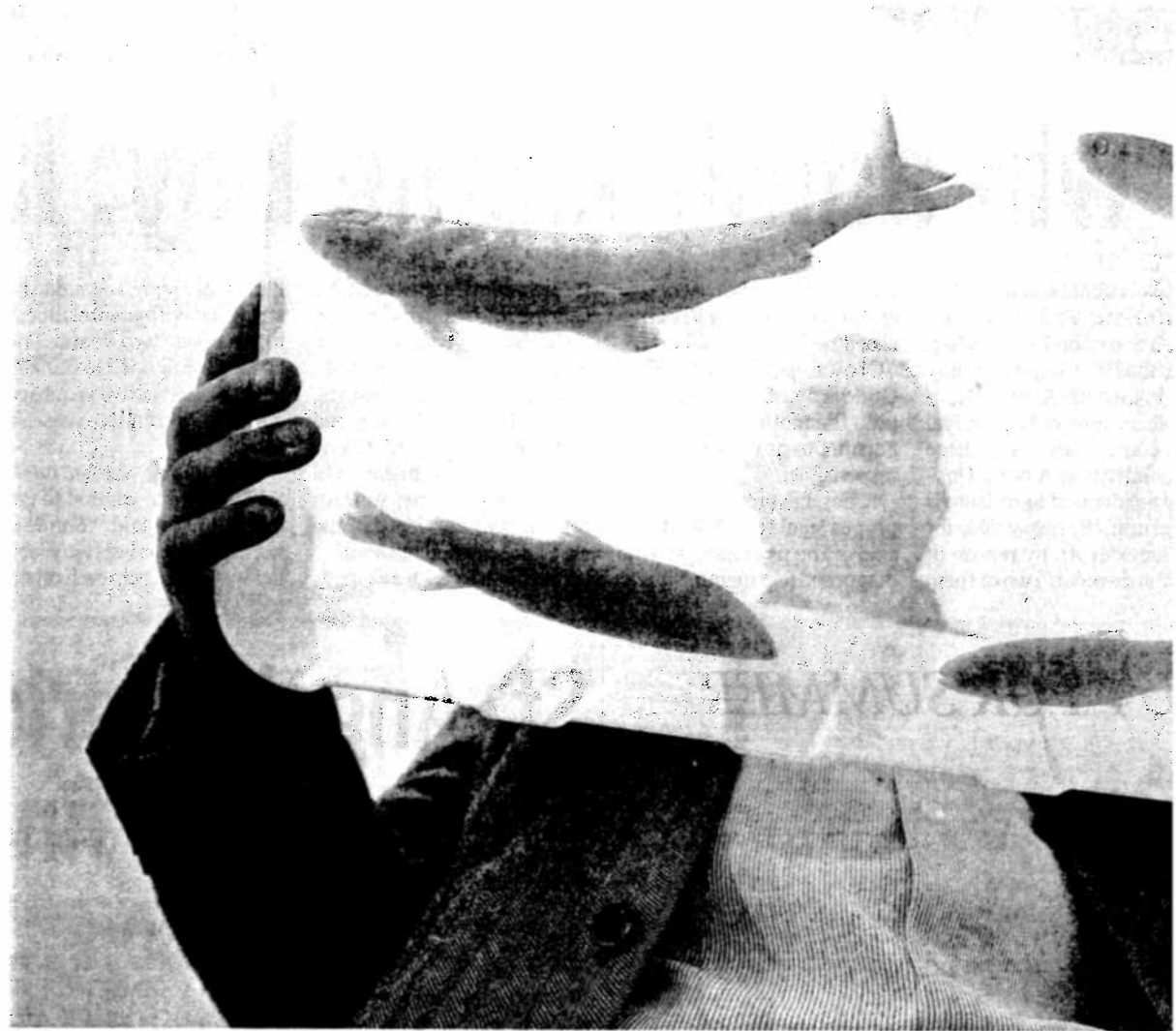
The University of Alberta conservation ecologist and freshwater fish expert is hoping a new online tool at [www.markpoesch.com](http://www.markpoesch.com) will capture all that data and more: changes in the distribution of fish populations, the presence of invasive species or rarer fish, such as the elusive Rocky Mountain Sculpin, a small, threatened bottom-dweller found only in southern Alberta's Milk River watershed.

"As a researcher, I can't be everywhere at once," Poesch said Friday in his eighth-floor lab inside the General Services building. "We're trying to change that paradigm of the ivory tower where researchers sit in their office, they do their work and kind of stay there."

The website has three "citizen science" tools, where anglers can upload photos, complete a survey to get a rough sense of fish populations or answer questions about how things once were. There's no time frame for entries, which will be collected and used to fine-tune his lab's own research.

Projects in his lab include studies on the effects of culverts and stream crossings near Grande Prairie and the effects of oilsands production on the Athabasca watershed.

The idea to invite input from everyday fishermen was partly



U of A researcher Mark Poesch, holding a container of preserved fish including northern pike, rainbow trout and arctic grayling, v

a response to anglers who spotted something unusual on their fishing trips but didn't know where to turn.

With 350,000 registered anglers and just 800 lakes, Alberta has Canada's highest rate of lines in the water. While that might put pressure on a fragile resource, it also means there's a lot of folks minding the waters.

"We're trying to get the word out there so we can interact with them as researchers," Poesch said. "That's the great thing about anglers. They're really invested in the resource."

Poesch shows off a

smorgasbord of preserved fish to demonstrate just what he has in mind. Along with the minuscule sculpin, there's northern Alberta's arctic grayling, a fish with a distinctive dorsal fin, currently listed under special concern due to its vulnerability to climate change and damming. There's a burbot, also known as *lota lota*, a smooth dark fish with whisker-like filaments. Poesch flips over a mountain sucker, currently under evaluation to see if it deserves special listing. Then there are the mollusks, whether it's the white heelsplitter found in southern Alberta or the more ubiquitous fatmucket.

"They've got great names. The mussel people are pretty creative," Poesch said. "A lot of people ignore mussels, but they're one of the taxonomic groups undergoing severe decline."

Poesch is also keen to know more about Alberta's bull and west slope cutthroat trout populations. The Rocky Mountain natives are being nudged out in a turf war with their brown, brook and rainbow non-native trout brethren. And if you've caught a sturgeon with a tag in it, there's a link on the site to show you where to go.

For his own part, Poesch grew

up just outside Toronto, where he earned his PhD, learned to fly fish and cast his lures in the Credit River to snag the Chinook Salmon, a West Coast native introduced in the Great Lakes decades earlier.

"I'm an angler, that's why I got into this job," Poesch said. "I love fish, I love fishing."

He arrived at the university last July after a two-year fellowship with Fisheries and Oceans Canada in Burlington, Ont. Poesch hasn't had much of a chance to do fishing of his own, and may not get out that ivory tower this weekend, but he expects the bite to be biting.