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Students hooked on Bonnie

BYLINE: By Brett Prettyman

Many of them have never been fishing, but the students at Parkview Elementary have already learned the most celebrated aspect of being an angler: big fish tales.

And it's possible they have the biggest tale of them all.

Meet Big Bonnie, a 6-foot-long, 40-pound Bonneville cutthroat trout created by a cheerful bunch of 200 or so third- to sixth-grade students at the elementary school in Glendale.

Pam Fitches, a fourth-grade teacher at Parkview, incorporated the Bonneville cutthroat trout into her lesson plan after reading a fishing column in *The Tribune* last fall.

The column detailed efforts to return native trout to the Diamond Fork River in Spanish Fork Canyon. Fitches shared information about the project, co-sponsored by the Division of Wildlife Resources and Trout Unlimited, with her students, and was pleasantly surprised by the reaction.

"They all wanted to know why it is called a cutthroat. It sounded so swashbuckling," Fitches said.

The class searched for images of Bonneville cutthroat on the Web and was disappointed in the lack of pictures and in those few they did find.

"It was hard to point to those tiny slashes and tell them that's how they got their name," she said. "They just weren't as dramatic as their name."

While they are part of the cutthroat trout family - *Oncorhynchus clarki utah* is the official name - Bonneville cutthroats do not strongly exhibit the trademark crimson slash on the lower jaw that other cutthroat have.

Taking a cue from the strong interest of her students, Fitches continued to research the Bonneville cutthroat, because it is the state fish of Utah, which is right in line with fourth-grade Utah studies.

Using pictures and a frozen specimen of Bear Lake cutthroat - a form of Bonneville from Bear Lake on the Utah/Idaho border - provided by anglers, and a \$480 grant from the SHOPA "Kids in Need" Foundation, the students started to

work on their larger-than-life model. Along the way, they learned a bit about the history of trout in Utah.

"The year I was born [1997], they changed the state fish from a rainbow trout to a Bonneville trout," said 10-year old Alexis Castro. "Rainbows didn't live here forever and cutthroat did. I almost caught [a Bonneville] once in the Jordan River, at least I think it was a Bonneville. Did you know cutthroat are kind of dumb?"

Well, dumb at least as far as fish go. Cutthroat are widely recognized as the easiest of all trout to catch, earning them the "dumb" label.

Antonio Rodarte, who is also 10, took his job of painting the tail of Big Bonnie seriously, on a school day earlier this week. He said Utahns today need to respect what the Bonneville cutthroat did for our ancestors.

"Without the Bonneville cutthroat there wouldn't be any pioneers," said Rodarte, accurately pointing out that the trout from Utah Lake fed many of the pioneers while they were waiting for the first crops to grow.

"They got their name from ancient Lake Bonneville," 10-year-old Veronika Perea burst out, eager to share the information. "Did you know one of the biggest problems with Bonneville cutthroat is that if the eggs get dirt on top of them, they will suffocate and die?"

Fitches, who has been teaching for 24 years, said there have been many unexpected benefits from the Big Bonnie project. Among them is a sense of the environmental challenges facing Utah's state fish.

"They wanted to know what predators were eating these fish and causing them to be so rare. It was interesting for them to see that water quality issues and nonnative species were the real threats," Fitches said.

The students also increased their vocabulary, keeping up with current events while spending hours pasting newspaper onto the Styrofoam form of the fish.

"Many of us at the school do not speak English at home, and learners need to actually use new words to retain them,"

Fitches said. "There is hardly ever enough conversation time, but we now have students who will use such words as habitat, survival, thriving and nonnative."

And the class found other things to talk about.

"The kids would see a picture or a headline in the paper as we worked on the fish and we would talk about the story as they were pasting it on Bonnie," she said.

Fitches also appreciated the opportunity to bump elbows with the students in a creative endeavor.

"It is rare for a teacher to be able to get in there and mix it up with them," she said. "They are used to me standing in front of them, not next to them. As we slowed down to place one little piece of paper at a time, we didn't feel pressed, and we were able to talk about things on a different level."

Fitches says she has thought about another state symbols lesson plan for the next school year, but she isn't quite ready to commit to doing a life-size Rocky Mountain elk (the official state animal of Utah).

She is more inclined to pursue the state insect.

"I think we could handle a honeybee," she said.

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Where to see Big Bonnie

Parkview Elementary will enter Big Bonnie in the "Walk on the Wild Side" art show for Salt Lake School District students, which will be on display daily, from 10:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., at Hogle Zoo, from May 10-25.

Bonneville cutthroat facts

* NATIVE AREA: This trout is endemic to the Bonneville Basin in Idaho, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

* IT'S OFFICIAL: The cutthroat replaced the nonnative rainbow trout as the state fish of Utah in 1997.

* ENDANGERED? A federal court recently affirmed a court ruling upholding the decision against listing Bonneville cutthroat as an endangered species. Some groups will continue to fight for the listing.

GRAPHIC: Parkview Elementary students, from left, Chandra Alderman, Veronika Perea, Alexis Castro, Emilio Gonzalez, Antonio Rodarte and Jordyn Ballami raise their creation: a 40-pound Bonneville cutthroat. Veronika Perea puts the finishing touches on the mouth of the Bonneville trout, which was created by Parkview students as part of a Utah history project. Charo Tarley (back left), Jon Sutton (back right), Silvia Santibanez (front right) and classmates at Parkview Elementary work on Big Bonnie.

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