



Lake Erie / Lake St. Clair Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee

Established by the Department of Natural Resources to improve and maintain the fishery resources of Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair, and the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers through better communication and partnership.

Meeting Notes Belle Isle Nature Zoo 176 Lakeside Drive, Detroit, MI 48207 April 14, 2015

10:00-10:05 Welcome and introductions (Bob Neely, Chair and Jim Francis, DNR)

Welcomed new members:

- Frank Corl – Downriver Bass Association
- Charles Legarski – Lake St. Clair Muskies Inc Chapter 58

10:05-10:15 Review the agenda and meeting minutes from October 2014 (All)

A summary of the status of action items from the last meeting will be discussed

- Notes from the fall meeting were approved and there were no changes to the agenda
- Committee membership was reviewed and several changes were made to update the list
- There was a reminder to notify the meeting organizer ahead of time if a committee member plans on bringing a guest. We need to know for meeting planning purposes.

10:15-11:00 Double-crested cormorant management in Michigan (Tim Wilson, Wildlife Services, USDA)

A review of cormorant control methods and efforts in Michigan.

Wildlife Services performs cormorant control under the USFWS Depredation Order, with input from Michigan DNR. The goal of control is to protect fisheries resources of the Great Lakes, as well as other public resources like colonial water bird nesting sites and protecting old growth cedars. Strategies for managing cormorants include harassment at spring spawning grounds and DNR fish stocking sites, and egg oiling and adult removal at nesting colonies. In 2014, a total of 9,983 cormorants were removed. Cormorant management began in the mid-2000s at Les Cheneaux, Ludington, Thunder Bay, Beaver Islands, and Bay De Noc and have been successful in achieving their control goals. From 2007-2014, the peak nesting of cormorants has been reduced 60%.

A cormorant diet study was conducted in Saginaw Bay in 2013-2014 at Little Charity Island and Spoils Island. Stomachs were collected from cormorants from April to September and diet analysis conducted by USGS. Cormorants consumed a variety of prey, with round goby, shiners, and nongame fish making up a majority of the diet. Predation on yellow perch was higher in spring compared to the rest of the breeding season, but overall perch consumption was negligible.

Sites where cormorant control activities will take place in 2015 include Les Cheneaux Islands, Bays De Noc, Beaver Islands, Ludington, Thunder Bay, Saginaw Bay, and harassment at inland lakes and stocking sites. Additionally, there are plans to begin control activities at Pt. Mouillee on Lake Erie. Although cormorant numbers are relatively low, they are affecting colonial water bird nesting for species including black crowned night herons.

Comments:

- It is important to control cormorants not just because of fisheries reasons, but also to benefit nesting shore birds.
- The state portion of the funding to support cormorant control has to be approved and allocated annually.
- There was a question about cormorant control at a specific site in the UP. There are small numbers of cormorants on Lake Superior and currently there is no management there. In order for Wildlife Services to expand the sites where control activities take place, local fisheries staff would have to illustrate a need.

11:00-11:15 Law Enforcement Division update (Sgt. Todd Szyska, MDNR-Law Enforcement)

Sgt. Szyska provided an update on a number of activities taking place in the area.

- Overall it was a good ice fishing season; officers observed that fishing activity on Lake St. Clair continues to be high.
- There is a fair amount of fishing activity taking place at the Clinton River Spillway, with anglers primarily targeting suckers.
- There is a new recruit school with about 40 new officers expected to graduate in November.
- Cabela's will be hosting a walleye tournament April 17-19 at the 9 Mile boat launch in St. Clair Shores.

Comments:

- Ralph Kandt reported that walleye fishing was hot in Port Huron and anglers were catching a lot of other species as well.
- Ted Meyer voiced a need for more Law Enforcement along the St. Clair River in Port Huron and shared an encounter with an unsportsman-like angler.

11:15-12:00 Should musky spearing be allowed on Lake St. Clair? (Cleyo Harris, MDNR-Fisheries)

A review of musky spearing regulations and discussion on whether musky spearing should be allowed on Lake St. Clair

The issue of muskellunge spearing on Lake St. Clair has been discussed several times previously at this advisory group. Proponents want to expand opportunities by allowing spearing, while opponents want to maintain existing regulations that prevent spearing in order to maintain a high quality fishery.

When considering muskellunge in Lake St. Clair, it is important to understand the history of the lake and fishery. Lake St. Clair itself has undergone dramatic changes – most notably - increased water clarity and an expansion of aquatic vegetation. The muskellunge fishery on Lake St. Clair dates back to 1900. It was a destination for muskellunge fishing and the fishery expanded after WWII. This early fishery was predominantly a harvest fishery. There was a year-round season, including winter

spearing until 1969. Over time the muskellunge fishery changed and it is now primarily a catch and release fishery. Over the past 40 years, changes in habitat, changes in fishing regulations, and changes in angler behavior (catch and release) have resulted in more and bigger fish.

A creel survey was conducted on Lake St. Clair from 2002-2005. That survey documented 2.3 million angler hours annually from the non-charter boat fishery and an additional 600,000 angler hours of ice fishing. Muskellunge were the 4th most targeted species and release rates exceeded 90%. Guided charter trips for muskies averaged 200 trips annually from 2011-2013, producing a catch of 1,115 muskellunge and only 8 of those were harvested during the three year period.

Current muskellunge regulations on Lake St. Clair include a 42 inch minimum size limit, a harvest limit of 1 per angler per year (harvest tag required), the possession season is the first Saturday in June through December 15, and it is unlawful to fish by means other than hook and line (spearing is not legal). In 2013, a total of 49,821 harvest tags were obtained and that number increased to 107,060 in 2014. There is an online reporting form where anglers are encouraged to record harvest, but participation has been low; only 6 fish reported in 2014.

Of the 116 lakes and streams identified as having a muskellunge population, 27 are closed to spearing. Although spearing muskellunge on Lake St. Clair is not legal, there is a spearing season for yellow perch (January 1 thru the end of February) and northern pike (December 1 thru March 15). In addition, we are currently looking to expand the possession limit to 5 northern pike on the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, and Detroit River – which would further expand spearing opportunities.

Other considerations regarding the fishery include the fact that Lake St. Clair is managed jointly through Michigan and Ontario and Ontario regulations cover about 2/3 of Lake St. Clair. An additional factor that may decrease interest in harvest is a “no consumption” advisory for all muskellunge from Lake St. Clair.

Predator abundance is high (muskellunge, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, walleye, northern pike, bowfin, gar, channel catfish), but there are ecological benefits of a diverse and abundant predator population. Abundant predators provide biotic resistance to the establishment and spread of non-native species. However, concerns have been expressed by some that there are too many predators and they are affecting the quality of the yellow perch fishery. Yellow perch are important because during the creel survey (2002-2005), over half of all fishing trips on Lake St. Clair were directed at yellow perch and the annual harvest was estimated at 750,000 yellow perch (roughly 10 per acre).

June index trawling in Anchor Bay showed good recruitment for yellow perch in 1998, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2013. In combination with the 2007 and 2008 year classes, the 2010 year class will continue to support a good yellow perch fishery over the next several years. There is no indication that musky predation is reducing the yellow perch population or size structure in Lake St. Clair. In fact, a reasonable case can be made that human fishing activity is more likely a driving factor of the yellow perch population in Lake St. Clair.

This exact topic was discussed previously at the Lake Erie / Lake St. Clair Citizen Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting in 2011. In 2015, the Management Team of

Fisheries Division discussed the topic and the decision was made to not pursue legalizing muskellunge spearing on Lake St. Clair at this time. There is also a 2015 MUCC resolution to oppose further opening of waters to musky spearing.

Discussion:

- Ted Meyer made the point that shore anglers are not happy with the number of muskellunge they are encountering. They are considered a nuisance because they are biting off lines of shore anglers. Ted also raised the issue that if a boat angler brings a fish to shore, there is no way to determine whether it was caught in Michigan or Ontario.
- Ralph Kandt emphasized that the fishery should be managed biologically. The tournament and charter catch is small compared to the public. During the summer, abundance is high but harvest is nonexistent. Even following the large musky die-off several years ago, it did not affect the population – so how can anyone argue against allowing a few to be harvested in the winter by spearing. If musky become too abundant, it could lead to another disease outbreak. Ralph still feels there are too many predators and they are contributing to the decline of perch; musky eat a lot of perch.
- Jim Felgenauer feels there is no reason to limit musky harvest this way, but looking at both sides of the issue, there does not seem to be a compelling argument that would sway the NRC toward opening the season on Lake St. Clair.
- Ralph Kandt made the point that spearing is allowed on other lakes, but it makes no sense that spearing is prohibited on the best musky lake in the state. Some anglers are killing musky just to kill them.
- Ted Meyer feels that special interest is driving the regulations.
- Stan Bydlos pointed out that the proposed MUCC resolution regarding muskellunge spearing has not been voted on and adopted yet.
- Bob Neely took an unofficial poll of those present – 8 favored spearing on Lake St. Clair, none were opposed, and 5 felt they did not have enough information to make a decision.

12:00-12:45 **Lunch—provided by DNR**

12:45-1:30 **SCDRS Fishery Update (Todd Wills, MDNR-Fisheries)**

An update on fish surveys and projects along the St. Clair-Detroit River System (SCDRS)

A fishery is the interaction between fish, habitat, and people (in this case Lake St. Clair and connecting waters) and results in major social and economic benefits for southeast Michigan. The social and economic benefits can be summarized by Food (harvest fisheries like walleye and yellow perch provide an important source of protein), Finance (in 2004 the fishery in the St. Clair System generated >\$36 million in just Michigan waters), Fun (“recreational” fishery), and Function (ecological function and indicator species).

Yellow perch are the most sought after species on Lake St. Clair, the fishery has an open water and ice fishing component, and anglers harvest about 750,000 yellow perch annually. June index trawling in Anchor Bay showed good recruitment in 1998, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2013. In combination with the 2007 and 2008 year classes, the 2010 year class will continue to support a good yellow perch fishery over the next several years.

Walleye fishing accounts for about 30% of the boat fishing effort on Lake St. Clair and anglers harvest about 40,000 walleye annually. During the last creel survey (2002-2005), roughly 250,000 legal-sized walleye were harvested annually from Michigan waters of the St. Clair System. Many of the walleye caught are migratory, spawning in the Detroit River and Lake Erie. Walleye index trap netting in Lake St. Clair has been variable from 2002-2014, with no clear trend in abundance. In Lake Erie, the walleye population estimate projects comparable number for both 2014 and 2015.

Smallmouth bass accounts for about 20% of the boat fishing effort on Lake St. Clair. Over 100,000 legal-sized bass are caught annually, but >90% are released. This fishery attracts many out-of-town anglers and tournaments. Index trap net catch-per-effort has declined over the past several years on both the Michigan and Ontario sides of the lake. Index trawling for young-of-year smallmouth bass found a below average year class in 2014, with the last strong year class in 2010. Even with the high density of bass in Lake St. Clair, their growth rates continue to be above the statewide average.

The Lake St. Clair muskellunge fishery has a reputation for high catch rates and fish exceeding 50 inches have become more common. About 30% of all charter trips on Lake St. Clair are for muskellunge. Index trap netting in Anchor Bay finds good numbers, although catch rates are low relative to other species. The weight-at-age of muskellunge is greater for females relative to males.

In addition to the Big Four species (yellow perch, walleye, smallmouth bass, and muskellunge), there is a very diverse fishery including panfish, northern pike, largemouth bass, and channel catfish. And there are unique opportunities for several species like lake sturgeon and mooneye. Given the high population in SE Michigan and good access, the Lake St. Clair fishery gets intense fishing pressure. Evaluating the fishery on an angler hour per acre basis, the Lake St. Clair fishery gets 60 times the pressure compared to the Lake Michigan fishery! This fishery also supports a popular charter boat fishery, with over 1,000 trips on the St. Clair system in 2014. And one of the most important points about this fabulous fishery – no stocking!

In 2015, we are working with Ontario MNR&F to conduct the first ever international creel survey on the Detroit River. This project is being done with support from the USGS-Great Lakes Science Center.

The 2014 Status Report is available:

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/LSCFRS_2014AnnualReport_484984_7.pdf?20150520093615

1:30-2:00

Belle Isle Update (Joe Hall, MDNR-Parks and Recreation)

Belle Isle has been a State Park for just over a year now – Joe will provide an update on all the hard work Parks has invested to improve the island.

Joe provided a great overview of all the hard work that has been done on Belle Isle since becoming a State Park. Many of the changes that have taken place over the past year have been visible improvements that have been easy to see. But now that the park looks much better, the next level of investment will be more infrastructure related and improvements may be less visible to the public. The park is getting extensive use – a count of 2 million visitors over a 6 month period.

Comments:

- Stan Bydlos inquired about a boat launch on the island and indicated that the siting of the launch will be important to its success. Joe indicated that there are plans to develop a boat launch and they would engage anglers and tournament groups for input on design and location.

2:00-2:30

Fisheries Division Update (Jim Francis, MDNR-Fisheries)

Jim provided a summary of the Lake Erie fishery. Both walleye and yellow perch harvest have trended down over the past several years. An estimated 34,326 walleye and 161,885 yellow perch were harvested in 2014. Although the harvest was down for both species, fishing effort has also been trending lower. Therefore, catch rates for both species has been relatively constant over the past six years. The walleye harvest was primarily age-3 and age-4 cohorts, but there was still good representation from the very strong 2003 year-class. The age structure for the yellow perch harvest in 2014 was primarily age-4 and age-5.

The Lake Erie walleye population model (age-2 and older) projects a slight decline in 2015 (24 million walleye) relative to 2014 (25 million walleye). But a good year class in 2014 is expected to enter the fishery in 2016 and the projection is expected to be near 31 million walleye. The 2014 walleye year class is the best year class since the very strong 2003 year class. There were also good year classes in 2007 and 2010. Based on the established walleye Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for 2015, the sport fish daily bag limit in Michigan waters of Lake Erie will remain at 6 walleye.

The Lake Erie yellow perch population model (age-2 and older) projects a significant increase from 21.4 million perch in 2014 to 34.1 million perch in 2015. Although this is an increase of almost 60% by number, the biomass is expected to increase only 30%. This disproportionate increase is because a large portion of the catch in 2015 will be age-2 fish; so the average size of the fish caught will be smaller. The 2014 year class was the strongest since 2003; the young-of-year trawl index catch was double the long-term average.

There were several updates regarding regulations. Both the Combined Possession Limit (CPL) for predators (statewide) and the increase bag limit for northern pike to 5 on the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, and Detroit River will be discussed at the upcoming public meetings. We also reviewed the timeline for the Michigan BASS Nation proposal that was initiated in spring 2013: Catch and Immediate Release (CIR) on all waters Jan 1 through Friday before Memorial Day and possession season on all waters the Saturday before Memorial Day through December 31. After an extensive internal and public review process, an alternate proposal was submitted to the NRC in March 2015: CIR year around and Catch and Delayed Release (CDR) for groups registered on the DNR online tournament system. The NRC approved the additional CIR opportunities, but not CDR. This was approved at the April 9 NRC meeting and is effective immediately.

Comments:

- Dave Realt clarified that the final proposal for the bass season that was submitted for NRC consideration was not consistent with the original BASS Nation proposal. Bass clubs were not the ones that initiated the request for CDR.

2:30-3:00

Committee member round table (All)

- Rick Kretzschmar – walleye regulation changes are being considered for Saginaw Bay; reminder for members of this committee to share background information and issues with their affiliate members.
- Stan Bydlos – discussed concerns regarding boating access sites.
- Ralph Kandt – would prefer our next meeting in October take place before hunting seasons begin; concerns were raised regarding shore fishing and access for ice fishermen at the Selfridge site, as well as Fairhaven and the Spillway.
- Matt Einheuser – the Clinton River Watershed Council is working on fish habitat projects to delist the Clinton River as an Area of Concern (\$11 million); the Clinton River Coldwater Conservation Project is working in Paint Creek and doing cleanups throughout the watershed.
- Charlie Legarski – this was first meeting attended and will continue to participate.
- Bob Neely – expressed an interest in more Lake Erie representation on the committee and the need to get more younger people involved.
- Gerry Sickon – reminded group about the Lake Erie Sea Grant workshop next week in Taylor.
- Frank Corl – impressed with the work that went into the April NRC meeting regarding the bass regulation topic
- Bob Burns – there are several large habitat projects in the Detroit River that are either recently completed or planned – Lake Okonoka reconnection, Stony Island, Celeron Island.
- John Giszczak – charter boat association is raising money and gearing up for tribal consent negotiations.
- Mary Bohling – mentioned Area of Concern projects including spawning reefs in the St. Clair and Detroit rivers.
- Jim Felgenauer – Sturgeon for Tomorrow is assisting with the sturgeon festival in Port Huron and assisting with sturgeon guarding in the Black River.
- Mike Eichbrecht – there will be more discussion regarding the walleye and yellow perch regulations for Saginaw Bay.
- Ted Meyer – need to teach people how to follow the law; still considers bass clubs to be in violation of the law when culling.
- Dave Realt – glad to see the year-round CIR for bass; the delayed release prior to the regular season concept came from the NRC, not the bass clubs; agrees the need to study potential impacts of CDR
- Todd Wills – trap net surveys will begin next week in Lake St. Clair; there will be upgrade to the research vessel (R/V Channel Cat).

3:00-3:15

Open discussion, summary of meeting, future meeting topics and locations (Bob Neely)

Next meeting will be scheduled mid-September to mid-October – try to avoid hunting seasons.

Lake Erie / Lake St. Clair Citizens
Fishery Advisory Committee

Belle Isle Nature Zoo
April 14, 2015

Attendees:

Name	Affiliation
Bob Neely	Chair
Mary Bohling	Michigan Sea Grant
Gary Williams	MDNR/MSU Extension
Chuck Pistis	GLFC Lake Erie Advisor
Bob Burns	Friends of the Detroit River/Detroit Riverkeeper
Jim Felgenauer	St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow
Mike Eichbrecht	Charter Captain/Michigan Sportsman.com
Matt Einheuser	Clinton River Watershed Council
Ralph Kandt	Wholesale Bait Dealers
John Giszczak	Michigan Charter Boat Association
Ted Meyer	Shore Fisherman
Gerry Sickon	Michigan Steelhead and Salmon Fishermen's Association
Dave Realt	The Bass Federation of Michigan
Stan Bydlos	MUCC District 8/Lake St. Clair Walleye Association
Charlie Legarski	Lake St. Clair Muskies Inc
Rick Kretzschmar	National Professional Anglers Association
Bill Furtaw	MUCC District 8
Frank Corl	Downriver Bass Association
Bruce Yinger	Downriver Bass Association
Wesley Kandt	Wholesale Bait Dealers
Larry Deslover	MDNR-Law Enforcement
Craig Milkowski	MDNR-Law Enforcement
Jim Francis	MDNR-Fisheries
Mike Thomas	MDNR-Fisheries
Todd Wills	MDNR-Fisheries
Jeff Braunscheidel	MDNR-Fisheries
Cleyo Harris	MDNR-Fisheries
