

What's Happening to Our Lake Erie Fishery?

by
Dave Kelch

Ohio Sea Grant Extension, Elyria, Ohio

During the 1990s, we have experienced a number of changes to our Lake Erie fishery; some good, some bad, but changes none the less. Not a week goes by when I'm not asked, "what's happened to the fishery?" by a disgruntled angler, who usually expects not only an answer, but also a "silver bullet" solution to the problem. It's not that easy.

I try to explain that our Lake Erie fishery, both sport and commercial, is far better during the 1990s than it was during the 1960s and 1970s. Our smallmouth bass fishery is probably the best it's been in years. Our Lake Erie fishery during 1990s has been exceptionally good when compared to the past; yet not as good as during the 1980s. The reason? Changes occurring within the lake's ecology, and the constant changing and unpredictable patterns of Mother Nature.

Over the past few years, anglers have pointed accusing fingers towards a number of 'scape goats' to blame for our changing fishery. Those accused include zebra mussels, cormorants, commercial netting, pollution, angling tournaments, spring angling for egg-laden walleye and smallmouth, liberal bag limits, changing lake levels, the stocking of predator species (steelhead), and most recently,

management agencies. A quick fix is demanded; "We want a Lake Erie sport fishery like we had during the mid-1980s!" is the battle cry being heard. Again, it's not that easy. Let's look logically, yet briefly, at the problem, beginning with Lake Erie's recent past.

Many of us have had the opportunity to see Lake Erie come from a so-called "dead lake" during the 1960s and early 1970s, to a tremendous fishery during the 1980s. Walleye, smallmouth bass, and yellow perch were abundant, and limit catches were the rule. Many years of successful walleye and perch spawnings were fueled by an abundant food system, taking the young fry to adulthood and into the anglers bag. Management agencies, basing their decisions on principles such as Maximum Sustainable Yield (fish are allowed to be caught, yet only in numbers which allow their populations to continue to thrive), allocated fish for both sport and commercial harvest.

Life was good, especially if you were a Lake Erie angler. Then came the 1990s. Lots of changes. In fact, more changes than Lake Erie had experienced for quite some time. Aquatic nuisance species, such as the zebra mussel and spiny European water flea, have made an impact to the lake's

ecological balance. Food chains have been altered. Water clarity has improved dramatically (due to both the filtering of the zebra mussel, and phosphorous reduction), and has impacted the behavior of fish such as the walleye. Another exotic invader, the round goby, has become a major nuisance to anglers. Cormorant populations, due to a number of reasons, have rebounded dramatically to record numbers, and are consuming large numbers of fish, not to mention destroying unique island habitats. Erratic weather patterns and changing lake levels have both caused changes to our fishery. Decreases in phosphorous inputs to the lake have resulted in increased levels of dissolved oxygen and reduced productivity at the base of the food chain. And toxic contaminants are still present, possibly impacting our fishery.

Spawning success and growth to adulthood has not been as good during the 1990s for a number of sport species, including the walleye. Mother Nature, not one of the aforementioned accused, can be blamed here. Wind, waves, water currents, and erratic spring weather patterns can dramatically impact spawn-

ing success. Predatory fish species (including walleye, yellow perch, white bass, white perch, small-mouth bass, sunfish species, catfish, and yes, the goby) can and will consume young fish fry, and may also consume fish eggs; everything in the lake must eat to survive. And after the eggs hatch, food must be abundant for growth of the young fry. In this instance, the potential impacts may be not only weather related, but also related to impacts by zebra mussels, spiny water fleas, and the reduction in phosphorous.

Conclusion:

There are numerous reasons our fishery is in a state of change and, historically, fluctuations in Lake Erie fish populations have been very common. Let's face the fact that we were spoiled during the 1980s, and now we want it back. But the lake is changing in many ways, and some of those changes we have little or no control over, e.g. Mother Nature.

My advice would be to let the management agencies do their jobs. Our Lake Erie fishery is managed cooperatively by a number of state and federal agencies, not just the Ohio Division of Wildlife, and involves lots of research and data collection. The individuals responsible for managing our Lake Erie resources are well- educated professionals. They have every reason to manage the resource properly and to the best of their ability for ALL user groups. Remember, the decisions our resource managers make are based upon historic data, research findings, annual assessments,

knowledge of the lake's ecological system, years of experience, and high levels of education- not on emotions and gut feelings, Our current fishery may not meet with the expectations of some. However, we can still be thankful for a sport fishery far superior to most other lakes, with room for a commercial fishery to supply Lake Erie fish to the non-angling public.

This article first appeared in the January/February issue of "Twine Line" is has been reprinted Courtesy of Ohio Sea Grant.

From Record, page 30

Both Tom and Wally knew that their fish was greater than 16 pounds and that's when the excitement set in.

After reaching shore, Tom called the authorities at Fairport and they verified that the current state record for lake trout was 16 pounds. Tom's new record weighed in at a monstrous 20.49 pounds, was 35 inches long and had a 23 inch girth. Biologists performed a scale analysis and estimated the fish to be 24 years old.

Tom caught his state record with an Ugly Stick pole, Shimano reel and 12 pound test line.

Tom Harbison runs *Harbison Charters* out of the Port of Conneaut where he also owns and operates the *Lakefront Motel* (www.lakefrontmotel.com).

From Perch, page 21

miles offshore holding over reefs or under random clouds of bait. So, a fish locator is vital. And sometimes they're hard to entice to a hook. One old charter captain I fished with had an answer for that.

We'd find a school and if nothing much happened, he'd have the clients bait hooks with 6-8 dead minnows, lower them to bottom, and jerk hard! The sudden arrival (chumming) of lots of minnows often started them hitting, and once a few were hooked, they stirred up others and limits came quickly. An ancient trick, but it worked wonders, and it'll work for you.

Wherever you go for summer fishing, the rules are still simple. Find the fish, use proper gear, and when biting stops, move elsewhere and try again. It's a formula that will provide some excellent eating this summer.

**Advertise in
Lake Erie
Walleye Magazine**
Full Page\$ 400
Half Page\$ 200
Quarter Page\$ 100
Business Card\$ 50
Call 1 800 347-4519