

Walleye News and Fact File

Walleye and Perch Quotas Set For Lake Erie Anglers

The Lake Erie Committee of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission recently set annual harvest levels for Lake Erie's two most sought-after fish — walleye and yellow perch. Committee members agreed to reduce the total allowable catch (TAC) of walleyes for the second year in a row, while the TAC for yellow perch remains about the same as 1999, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife.

The Lake Erie Committee, made up of fisheries managers from Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ontario, meets annually to determine the status of Lake Erie fish stocks and, by consensus, establish international harvest quotas for individual jurisdictions surrounding the lake.

The TAC for walleye was set at 7.7 million fish, down 12 percent from the 1999 TAC of 9 million fish. The 1998 TAC was 10.3 million fish.

“A projected decline in the lakewide abundance of walleye in 2000 prompted committee members to recommend a reduction in the allowable harvest,” said Mike Costello, administrator in the Division of Wildlife's Fish Management and Research Group and Ohio's representative on the Lake Erie Committee. “The abundance of two years old and older walleye is an estimated 50 million fish in 2000, down 14 percent from the estimated 57 million fish in 1999.”

“Lake Erie's popular walleye fishery will have to rely heavily on the strong 1996 year class for the third straight year due to weak walleye hatches in 1997 and 1998,” Costello added.

Of the total allowable lakewide harvest of walleyes, harvest quotas are allocated to individual jurisdictions determined by a formula based on surface area within each jurisdiction. Ohio and Ontario receive the

majority of the walleye TAC. Of the 2000 TAC of 7.7 million walleyes, Ohio's share is close to 4 million fish, about 51 percent of the TAC. Ontario's share of the TAC is about 3.3 million fish, about 43 percent.

The daily bag limit for walleyes in the Ohio waters of Lake Erie is 10 fish per angler. Commercial fishing for walleye is not permitted in Ohio.

The TAC for yellow perch in Lake Erie for 2000 was set at 6.57 million pounds, close to the 6.6 million pounds set in 1999. Yellow perch quotas for individual jurisdictions surrounding the lake are based on a different sharing formula than walleye, involving surface area and past fishing performance.

Ohio's share of the 2000 TAC is 2.86 million pounds. Ontario receives about 3.37 million pounds, with Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York receiving smaller portions of the share. Ohio's yellow perch quota is then allocated between sport and commercial fisheries. Sport anglers are allocated 66 percent of Ohio's yellow perch quota, and commercial anglers are allocated 34 percent of the quota.

“Lake Erie Committee members kept the yellow perch TAC at a level similar to that of 1999 because yellow perch stocks are strong in the Central Basin,” said Costello. However, there is concern for stocks in the Western and Eastern Basins. The continuing recovery of yellow perch stocks will depend on how much the moderate to strong 1996 and 1998 year classes contribute to the population. A weak year class in 1997, which enters the fishery this year, will add very little to the fishery.”

The daily bag limit for sport anglers remains at 30 perch per angler and existing commercial fishery regulations remain in effect to ensure Ohio will stay within its quota.

“In response to continuing concern for both walleye and yellow perch, the committee decided to pursue

coordinated, long-term strategies to protect and rebuild these stocks,” said Costello. “Besides reinstating a lakewide tagging study to examine the walleye stock, we will be developing more comprehensive strategies to sustain the populations of these two key species at desirable levels.”

*From Ohio Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife*

Lake Erie 2000 Fishing Outlook

More great fishing lies ahead for Lake Erie anglers for the year 2000, according to fisheries information compiled by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife.

“Fishing for yellow perch and smallmouth bass were fantastic all across the lake during 1999, and this trend should continue throughout this year and beyond,” said Roger Knight, supervisor of the Division of Wildlife’s Sandusky Fisheries Research Station. “On the other hand, a number of factors made for some challenging walleye fishing during 1999. Anglers will have to take a wait-and-see approach for 2000, as weather and foraging conditions will likely play a key role in determining fishing success. We expect a boost in numbers of 14- to 16-inch walleyes in 2001, when a large walleye hatch from 1999 enters the fishery.”

Following is wrap up of 1999 and what anglers can look forward to in 2000.

Yellow Perch

For the third consecutive year, yellow perch took center stage on Lake Erie during 1999. The good news is that anglers can expect the same great perch fishing in 2000.

The perch action heated up in early August, and even earlier for some frustrated walleye anglers. Excellent perch fishing occurred at many traditional hot spots

across both basins of the lake, and lasted through October and even later for some hardy anglers.

More than 5.6 million yellow perch filled the coolers of anglers who fished the Ohio waters of Lake Erie in 1999, slightly more than the previous year. Good-sized perch in the 8- to 10-inch range from the large year class spawned in 1996 dominated the harvest. These fish were from the largest hatch of perch in 10 years.

The angler catch rate (number of fish caught per hour of angling) was 3.19 (over three fish per angler hour.) September and October were the peak months for perch with catch rates of 3.34 and 3.41 respectively.

“Improved hatches in the mid- to late-1990s have helped the perch population rebound from low levels of the early 1990s,” Knight said. “A good number of fish from the large 1996 hatch will continue to be a part of the harvest and should measure 9 to 11 inches. Added to the catch will be many perch from an above average year class of 1998.”

Perch jerkers can also look forward to more great fishing into 2001 and beyond, Knight noted. A hefty 1999 year class of perch will enter the fishery in 2001. It is the second largest hatch since 1983, second only to the 1996 hatch, which has made up much of the harvest the past three years.

Smallmouth Bass

The popular angling magazine *In-Fisherman* was right on target when it recently ranked Lake Erie one of this year’s world’s best smallmouth bites. In a special issue *Angling Adventures 2000*, an *In-Fisherman* writer wrote, “From the flatlands surrounding Erie’s Western Basin to the rocky, hilly terrain of western New York, smallmouths inhabit every bay and reef.”

The excellent smallmouth bass fishing experienced by anglers in 1999 should be just as good in 2000. Smallmouth bass is Lake Erie’s third most sought-after species and becoming more popular with each passing season. Improved habitat and fair to good spawns throughout the past decade have provided good numbers of nice-sized smallies and excellent bass fishing opportunities all across the lake. Smallies from hatches of 1993, 1994, and 1995 made up most

of the catch in 1999 with catches in the 14- to 17-inch size range. This trend will continue in 2000.

The 1999 smallmouth harvest was 92,200 fish, an increase of 17,000 from the previous year. Since the majority of bass anglers release their catch, creel survey information includes angler catch rates of all smallmouth bass caught whether released or kept. The 1999 catch rate was .61 fish (at least one fish caught for every two hours fished). Angling pressure increased slightly from the previous year, a continuing trend over the past decade indicating the popularity of this Lake Erie fishery.

The Division of Wildlife is working to maintain this world-class fishery and reminds anglers of regulation changes affecting Lake Erie smallmouth bass. As of March 1, 2000, a smallmouth bass less than 14 inches must be returned to the lake. The legal bag limit is five fish per angler.

Walleye

Many walleye anglers were disappointed this past year with a catch of 1 million walleyes. The 1999 harvest was a 55 percent decrease from 1998, which was the best year in recent history for walleye anglers.

“The walleyes were there, they just weren’t taking the bait,” said Knight. “Anglers marked plenty of fish, and our net samples produced more walleyes than in recent years.”

Hoads of emerald shiners and gizzard shad in the lake, and continual mayfly hatches over a two-month stretch kept walleyes fed and uninterested in anglers’ bait and tackle. However, Knight noted that walleyes exposed to strong numbers of prey fish often produce larger, healthier hatches the following spring. A good hatch in 2000 could help boost the walleye population down the road.

Another contributing factor was the lack of a decent year class of walleyes entering the fishery last year. The walleye catch traditionally increases two years after a good hatch when the year class of fish become preferred keeper size. The 1997 year class of walleyes was below average.

Weather was also a factor in last year’s slump in walleye fishing. Bouts of strong wind conditions across the lake during traditional periods of peak walleye activity kept many anglers off the lake, or created wave conditions too rough for good fishing.

“The population is down from the high levels of the 1980s, but that certainly doesn’t mean the fishing will be poor,” said Roger Knight, supervisor of the Division’s Sandusky research unit. “The catch rates in 1999 were less than we observed in 1998 (a record year), but were similar to those from 1992, 1994, and 1997. Even in an off year, Lake Erie’s catch rates rival catch rates of any other walleye fishery in the country.”

In-Fisherman’s recent Angling Adventures 2000 included Lake Erie’s Western Basin (Toledo to Huron) and Central Basin (Huron to Conneaut) among the top 10 walleye angling destinations in North America.

The majority of the 1999 harvest was from the 1994 and 1996 year classes. The overall catch rate for private boat angler was .25 (one fish caught for every four hours of fishing), with peak fishing in June in the Western basin and July in the Central Basin.

Walleye angling in 2000 may not offer much improvement over 1999. Walleyes from the 1998 spawn entering the fishery this year are of below-average abundance, which means the overall fishable population size will be slightly lower than in 1999. However, numbers of prey fish and general weather conditions will also play a major role in determining fishing success rates and are unpredictable, Knight noted.

The majority of the 2000 catch will most likely be from the 1996 hatch measuring 16 to 19 inches. Other year classes that should make a showing will be the 1997 hatch measuring 14 to 16 inches, and the 1994 hatch at 20 to 24 inches. Anglers should also continue to reel in some trophy-size fish from earlier year classes still in the lake. A new state record walleye caught off Cleveland in November weighed 16.19 pounds, and was a remnant of the large 1986 year class. It surpassed the old state record of 15.95 pounds caught off Marblehead Lighthouse in March of 1995.

There is some good news on the horizon. Fisheries research indicates the 1999 walleye hatch looks like a fairly large one. Anglers should experience an upturn in walleye fishing in the year 2001 when this large year class enters the preferred "keeper size" at age two.

"If walleye anglers can be patient, they will see better fishing ahead," said Knight. "Too many factors are a part of the mix that affects the size of a population, quality of a fishery, and success of anglers. And all of these factors change from one year to the next."

Steelhead Trout

Central Basin anglers continued to take good numbers of steelhead trout in the 22- to 30-inch range during 1999. Some anglers target these fish, while others hook steelhead while trolling walleyes. Those large steelhead caught on the open lake in the summer return to cold water streams to spend fall through spring.

Steelhead action on Central Basin tributaries was excellent throughout the fall of 1999 and should continue throughout the winter months of 2000, said Kevin Kayle, supervisor of the division's Fairport Fisheries Research Station. The majority of the effort occurs on the Grand, Chagrin, and Rocky rivers, and Conneaut Creek, the four major tributaries in which 200,000 steelhead (50,000 per stream) have been stocked annually the past few years. The Division is increasing these stockings to 400,000 this spring, which should enhance the steelhead fishery even more beginning this year.

"Steelhead fishing on both the open water of Lake Erie and main streams of the Central Basin is becoming more popular each year as anglers discover this exciting fishery," said Kayle. "Through the steelhead stockings, the Division added to the mixed bag fish species available to Ohio anglers. Increased stockings in the future will be an added bonus for anglers."

*From the Ohio Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife*

From Editor, Page 2

the Division of Wildlife's ability to act quickly and decisively when the need arose. SB 241 clarifies the management of commercial fishing in three ways. First, the new law limits the commercial fishing rules to a five-year period. Second, the bill seeks to update the fish sizes for yellow perch, white bass and channel catfish in order to insure that the fish have an adequate opportunity to spawn prior to becoming a target of commercial fishermen. Third, the bill changes the opening date for commercial fishing for yellow perch from March 1 to May 1.

Kudos to Ohio State Senator Robert Gardner, for sponsoring the bill, and to the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association and all other organizations and individuals that supported it.

Now a word about lake levels. Sure lake levels are low and causing much distress to boaters and fishermen alike. But low is a relative term. Current lake levels are low relative to a few years ago. But in nature's grand scheme, these levels are moderate and the lake levels that we've all enjoyed the past several years have actually been higher than normal.

It was explained to me at the Spring Charter Captains Conference that lake levels occur in long 20-30 year cycles and we are just now entering a cycle of moderate lake levels (relative to the long term) and low (relative to the short term). The experts predict that lake levels in Lake Erie will continue to drop. In other words, it's likely going to get worse, before better. We need to just deal with it and get on with our fishing and boating pleasures.

Till next time, good fishing!!
