

# The 2002 Perch Report

by  
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**D**uring the mid-to-late 1980s the yellow perch populations in Lake Erie were among the highest on record. Limit catches by fishermen were extremely common during that time. In the early to mid 1990's the perch populations experienced a rapid decline.

In recent years Fisheries Agencies have put forth efforts aimed at rehabilitating the perch population. In 1996 the state of Ohio posed a 30 perch daily bag limit. Similarly the State of Pennsylvania places an 8 inch minimum size limit and a 20 perch daily bag limit on perch. Tighter regulations were also levied on commercial fishermen.

In the past few years it is apparent that perch stocks are improving in Michigan, Ohio and in Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie. Perch stocks are still low further east in New York waters.

This report represents our eighth consecutive year of reporting annual data on the status of yellow perch stocks in Lake Erie. The data used in this report have been obtained from official fisheries status reports obtained from Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York fisheries agencies. These reports were produced in the spring of 2002 and the data in them represent the perch stocks as evaluated in the year 2001. As in previous years, we examine each state individually to obtain an overall view of the yellow perch fish stocks lake-wide.

## Michigan Waters of Lake Erie

Harvestable-size yellow perch abundance in 2002 should be about the same in Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair compared to last year, with continued strong contributions from the 1998 year class.

Biologists estimated that around .27 million perch were harvested from the Michigan waters of Lake Erie during the 2001 season. This is up slightly from the year 2000 (.22 million) but lower than the .4 million caught in 1998 (see figure 1).

In 2001 the yellow perch harvest was dominated by age 3 fish (1998 year-class), which accounted for 44% of the total harvest. In combination age 2 (26%), 4 (17%) and 5 (11%) contributed 54% of the total harvest. Average lengths of harvested age 2,3, and 4 yellow perch were 7.4 inches, 8.4 inches and 8.7 inches. The observed average length at age for yellow perch taken in the Michigan sport fishery in 2001 remained below the levels of the mid-1990s, but similar to those of the early 1990s. Biologists suspect that increased abundance of yellow perch in recent years has resulted in slower growth in western Lake Erie.

## Ohio Waters of Lake Erie

Yellow perch abundance in Ohio waters improved again in 2001,

relative to the low numbers in the early 1990s due to successful reproduction in four of the last six years and reduced fishing mortality. The strong 1996 year class was mostly responsible for this increase. With moderate reproduction success in 1999 and poor reproduction in 2000, the numbers of yellow perch available to Ohio anglers in Lake Erie will be slightly lower in 2002 than a year ago.

Ohio sport and commercial fishermen met their allotted quotas in 2001. The 30-fish daily bag limit is again in effect for 2001.

In 2001 the combined private and charter yellow perch harvest was 5.5 million fish, virtually the same total as in 2000 (see figure 2). Private boat anglers harvested an estimated 5.2 million yellow perch, the same as was harvested in 2000. Charter anglers harvested about .3 million yellow perch in 2001. The overall catch rate in 2001 increased about 8% and anglers averaged 3.2 fish per angler hour during 2001. Private boat limit trips ranged from 20% in District 3 to 26% in District 1.

The 1998 year class made up 49% of the yellow perch harvest followed by the 1999 (22%) and the 1996 (21%) year classes.

## Comparing Districts

The Ohio waters of Lake Erie are divided into three Districts. District 1 is comprised of the western basin, extending to Huron,

OH. District 2 is in the central basin and extends from Huron to Fairport. District 3 extends from Fairport to Conneaut, OH.

Traditionally the greatest numbers of perch are harvested from the shallow western basin (District 1). In 2001 a total of 2.6 million perch (combined private & charter) were taken there. A total of 2.0 million fish were taken from District 2. A total of .8 million fish were harvested from District 3.

Generally, yellow perch harvested by sport anglers are larger as one moves from west to east (see figure 3). In 2001 this trend continued. The average size yellow perch caught in District 1 was 8.6 inches and .27 pounds. This increased to 9.5 inches and .4 pounds in District 2. In District 3 perch taken by anglers averaged 10.2 inches and .54 pounds.

### **Commercial Harvest**

In 2001 the total allocation to trap netters for yellow perch was 1 million pounds, the highest since the quota system was established. In District 1, a total of 179,234 pounds of yellow perch were harvested. In the central basin (combined Districts 2 & 3) a total of 909,560 pounds were harvested. The commercial harvest of yellow perch in Ohio waters was the highest in 10 years. The average trap net catch rate of 173 pounds/lift was the highest ever recorded and more than four times the ten-year average. The commercial harvest from District 2 accounted for 82% of the total commercial harvest for Ohio waters. The strong 1998 year class was the most abundant of

the six year-classes reported in the harvest.

### **Diet of Yellow Perch**

Adult yellow perch ate primarily benthic invertebrates (72%) in the Spring. As the summer progressed, perch switched to fish (44%). In the fall perch fed primarily on zooplankton (49%) and round gobies (29%).

### **Outlook for 2002**

The excellent perch fishing anglers have experienced the past four years should continue through 2001 and beyond, although the numbers predicted for 2002 will be slightly lower than the past two seasons due to the poor hatch of 2000 and the moderate 1999 hatch. Conservative regulations for sport and commercial fishers and improved spawns in the mid-to-late 1990s have helped Lake Erie's yellow perch stocks to gradually recover after low levels in the early 1990s.

Perch fishing will peak in September and October. The daily bag limit for yellow perch in Ohio waters will remain 30 fish/angler.

### **Pennsylvania Waters of Lake Erie**

In 2001 anglers directed an estimated 90,000 hours at yellow perch, a 29% increase in fishing effort from the 2000 estimates. In 2001 anglers harvested an estimated 271,000 yellow perch. This represents a 60% increase from the 2000 estimated harvest and a 335% increase from the 1996-2000 (see figure 4).

The strong 1998 year-class should yield larger numbers of perch caught in Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie in 2002. The persistence of the older age groups in the perch population (average age of 5.7 years) indicates desirable survival of the fishable stock.

Yellow perch angling was concentrated mainly in the central basin waters where over 88% of the harvest occurred. August and September accounted for 75% of the total yellow perch catch in 2001.

The average length perch caught in Pennsylvania waters was 9.6 inches. Yellow perch caught in 2001 ranged in age from 3 to 13 years, with 4 and 5 year-old fish (97 & 96 year-classes) accounting for the greatest proportion (43%) of the catch. Older age groups (>8 years old) accounted for 20% of the total catch.

### **New York Waters of Lake Erie**

The status of the yellow perch continues to improve in the New York waters of Lake Erie. Gill net and bottom trawling programs continue to corroborate observations of neighboring jurisdictions that abundance of adult yellow perch has increased in eastern Lake Erie. However, it remains uncertain whether this recent increase forecasts the beginning of a long-term recovery or simply the chance occurrence of two strong year classes within three years.

In 2001, in New York waters of Lake Erie an estimated 32,000

yellow perch were caught by fishermen. This is the highest total recorded since 1989 (figure 5).

Age-3 and age-5 yellow perch were the most abundant age groups in the 2001 collections. These age groups, representing the 1998 and 1996 year classes, together comprised 72 percent of the yellow perch sampled in the gill net assessments.



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**Yellow Perch Harvest Michigan Waters 1992-2001**

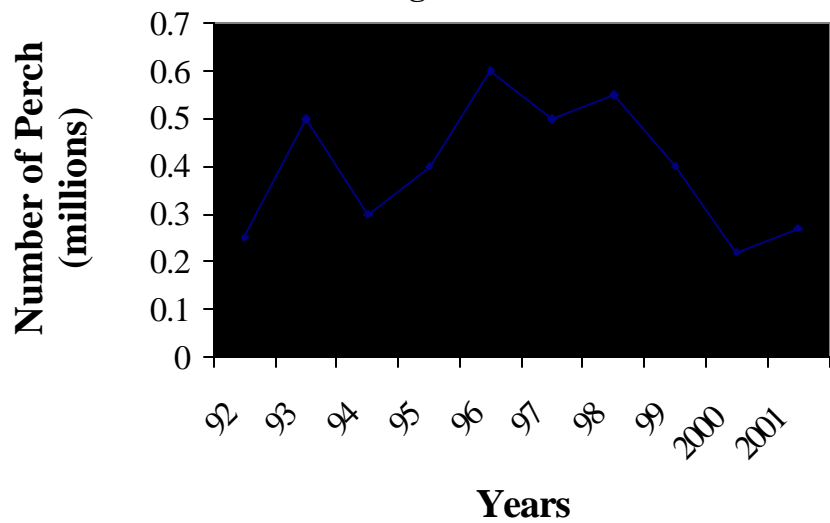


Figure 1. 10 year comparison of yellow perch catch from the Michigan waters of Lake Erie.

**Yellow Perch Harvest Ohio Waters 1991-2000**

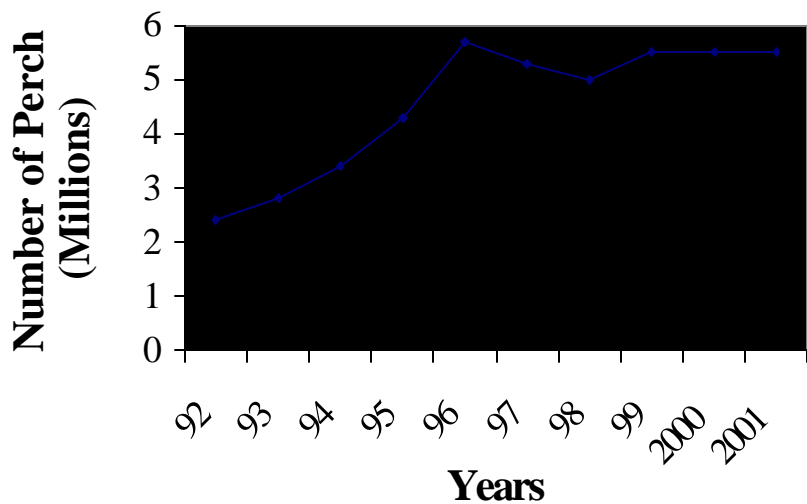


Figure 2. 10 year comparison of yellow perch catch from the Ohio waters of Lake Erie.

## Yellow Perch, Ohio Waters

Comparing Average Perch Size in 2001  
Between Districts 1,2,3

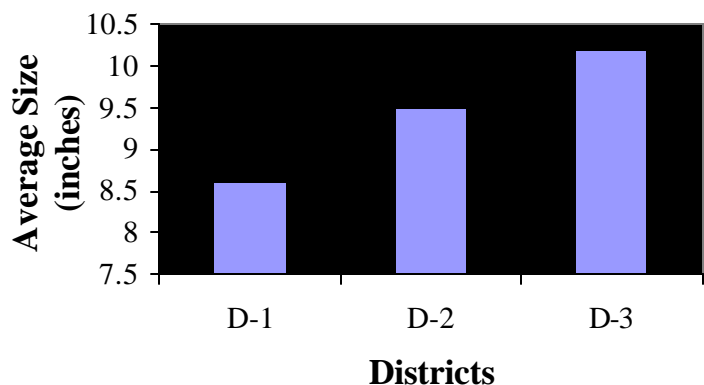


Figure 3. Comparison of yellow perch size among Ohio's District 1 (western basin), District 2 (west-central basin) and District 3 (central basin).

## Yellow Perch Catch

Pennsylvania Waters 1996 - 2001

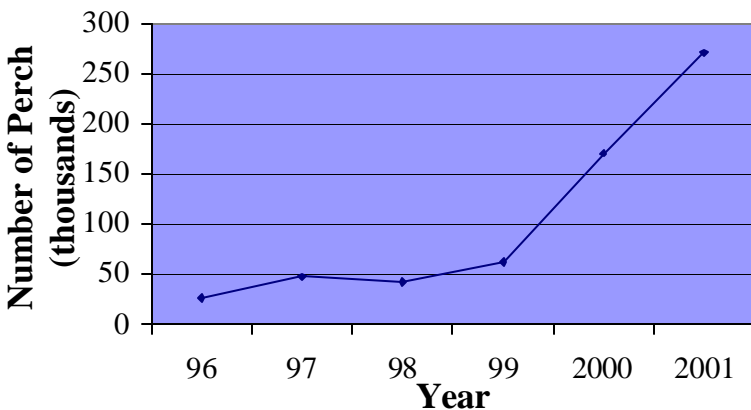


Figure 4. Six year comparison of yellow perch sportfishing catch in Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie.

## Yellow Perch Harvest

New York Waters 1992-2001

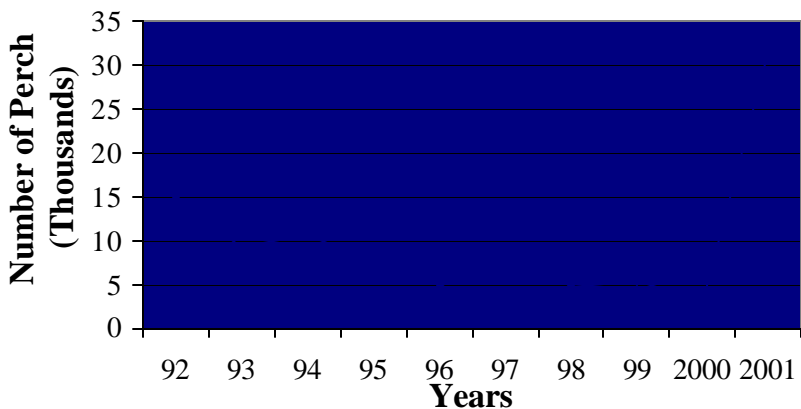


Figure 5 Ten year comparison of yellow perch sportfishing catch in New York waters of Lake Erie.