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St. Lawrence-Lakes Fish Study Released

WATERTOWN — Present fishing pressure is not adversely affecting the "abundant" populations of northern pike, yellow perch, and small-mouth bass in the St. Lawrence River, according to a general survey between Cape Vincent and Massena conducted this summer by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

In a recently published report, the DEC Fishery Division highlighted results of the 1975 fisheries program in Region 6, including aspects of environmental protection and management, species management, and public use and access.

Nettings on the St. Lawrence from mid-April to mid-June captured predominantly northern pike, white suckers, and yellow perch, according to the study. From mid-June until September, small mouth bass, yellow perch, and centrarchids predominated in the catch.

Movement to deep water by game species was noted as the water warmed. "Good" numbers of juvenile game species and forage fish were captured during mid-summer netting. As the water cooled in the fall, (pike, pickerel and muskellunge) once again returned to the catch and fish movement out of deep water occurred.

"The only walleyes collected were from below the dam at Massena. It appears the walleye fishing upstream from this section to Cape Vincent has collapsed," the report noted.

Muskie Study

In the St. Lawrence River Muskellunge Study, 31 muskie catches were reported by guides and fishermen on the river.

The average size was 38.7 inches (males) and 46.9 (females); average weight was 14.2 pounds and 22.4 pounds respectively. Only two females less than 40 inches were turned in, and both of them were immature.

A two-year sample of 10 females showed 50 per cent of those less than 40 inches were immature. Of those females less than 36 inches, 75 per cent were immature. This indicates that the current size limit of 26 inches should "probably" be increased to 36 inches, the DEC recommended.

Black Lake

In recent years, the DEC reports a decline in the Black Lake walleye fishery. This decline was first substantiated from the results of the walleye fry stocking evaluation conducted by Dr. John Forney of Cornell University. Black Lake was included in his study from 1971 through 1974. Annual sampling during this period indicated low densities of walleye fry.

To further evaluate the status of the walleye population, a sampling program designed to evaluate the abundance of this fish species was carried out in 1975.

No fingerling walleyes were collected during the six months of trawling and only 15 adult walleyes were collected with gill nets. In addition to the substantial decrease in walleyes was an accompanying increase in the black crappie population.

This reversal, the DEC proposes, is caused by the gradual increase of mineral and organic nutrients which reduces the dissolved oxygen, producing and environment that favors plant life over animal life (eutrophication), and crappie and walleye life. It is also hypothesized that the poor walley fry survival is the result of crappie predation.

Schuler Ponds

The state acquired title to the Schuler Property, a 4200-acre tract of land in the Town of Fine, which contains two lakes not surveyed since the 1930s and closed to the public for the last 30 years. Fishery surveys were completed in July prior to the opening of the area to the public.

Crystal Lake, the smaller of the two, was found to be chemically unsuitable for trout survival.

Streeter Lake was found to have a self-maintaining brook trout population. A sample of 28 fish ranging from seven to 14.5 inches was collected, and fingerling brook trout were collected from two of the lake's tributaries. All trout were in excellent physical condition and had been foraging extensively on the abundent golden shiner population.

To protect the Streeter Lake wild brook trout population from angler overharvest, special regulations were recommended for implementation before the opening of the 1976 trout season.

They include a three-fish creel limit, a 12-inch minimum size, and the exclusive use of artificial lures. This lake will be sampled again in 1977 to determine the status of the brook trout population following opening to public use.

There has been a great deal of publicity recently concerning the potential danger of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) levels in fish. A study of this and other hazards is currently being done.

A total of 154 fish were collected from eight waters: the Mohawk River at Little Falls, the Raquette River at Norfolk, the St. Lawrence River at Cape Vincent and Massena, and the Black River near Watertown for PCB testing. Samples were taken from Stillwater Reservoir, Cranberry Lake, Tamrack Pond, Upper Moshir Pond, and Horn Lake for determination of Methyl mercury content. Findings have not yet been analyzed.

Liming Continues

Liming of nine ponds was completed in 1975, to improve chemical conditions so trout will be able to continue to survive. Townline and Pine Ponds in St. Lawrence County were limed. Increasingly poor chemical conditions have forced the DEC to increase the program to maintain fishing waters.

Star Lake received stockings of fin-clipped lake trout in 1973 and 1975. An initial netting to establish standard sites was carried out this fall. Final evaluation of this program should be completed by 1980.

Monitoring splake population trends is continuing in the Darning Needle Pond, which received introductory stockings of splake fingerlings in 1971 and 1972. Survival and growth of these fish has been good, according to the DEC.

Sucker Lake in the Town of Fine is open to public fishing through a Fishing and Wildlife Management agreement, and has twice been reclaimed, most recently in 1973.

It is annually stocked with Canadian hybrid brook trout and managed under special regulations including a three-fish daily limit, 12-inch minimum, and exclusive use of artificial lures.

Population estimates to evaluate the trout population under the special regulations were completed in the fall of 1975. Only 10 fish age two or older were captured.

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This indicates an almost 100 per cent mortality of this year class fish, according to the DEC. Population estimates for the 1974 year class fish (now aged 1+) show a 95 per cent mortality for these fish.

Illegal Harvest Is Cause

The primary cause of this mortality is due to illegal harvest of undersize fish, the DEC claims, and the hooking mortality associated with the use of live bait.

Field observations during the spring and early summer by regional fisheries personnel indicate many anglers frequently violated the special regulations. Regional law enforcement personnel have been informed of the problem, and the Sucker Lake will be monitored in 1975 to see if there is a decrease in violations.

A decision will be made this fall on the desirability of continuing the present management plan and reclaiming the lake in 1977. If the present situation persists, it will not be possible to meet the objectives of managing Sucker Lake as a "trophy trout" water, and a change in policy will be necessitated.

Biological Surveys

Various biological surveys were undertaken in 1975 by the DEC. On the Joe Indian Lake, a resource inventory was undertaken, and the DEC found the natural spawning adequate for resident species.

Surveys on Ash Pond and Indian Mountain Pond for wilderness area planning and resource inventory, which had never before been studied, indicated both ponds were chemically unsuitable.

Stocking policy checks were conducted on Huckleberry Lake and Darning Needle Pond, which indicated natural spawning adequate for largemouth bass, yellow perch, and brown bullheads in Huckleberry Lake, and 800 splake fingerlings in Darning Needle.

A request survey on Cook Pond was undertaken which showed natural spawning adequate for resident species. Dwarf sucker collections were made for Cornell University at that time.

Nicks Pond studies of stocking policy and reclamation checks showed 800 splake fingerlings and no re-infestation of coarse fish.

Twin Lake North and South studies of stocking policy and reclamation checks showed 6,000 red salmon fingerlings and 600 brook trout fingerlings in North, and 3,000 rainbow trout fingerlings in the South.

After a reclamation check in Horseshow Lake, the DEC decided reclamation will be undertaken in 1976.

Resource inventory and stocking policy checks in the Turnpike Creek indicated no fish left in the stream because of mine silting. No more stocking will be undertaken in this stream.

The Windfall Brook stream protection survey indicated a population of entirely of brook trout, with natural spawning adequate.

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