Green Bay fishing appears 'nothing but brighter'

By DICK KARBON

GREEN BAY, Wis. (AP) — The emphasis is on the big pond these days, but Wisconsin fishermen might be missing the boat if they ignore the waters of Green Bay when planning future fishing trips.

Lunker trout and salmon in big Lake Michigan understandably have dominated the state's fishing scene for the past several years, while Green Bay, a prime fishing hole in its heyday, has taken a backseat.

There could be a slight shift in future attention, however, if the bay continues its comeback against pollution.

A decade ago, water pollution in the Fox River spewed into the bay and the subsequent lack of oxygen for fish meant the fined survivors generally were rough fish in the carp and bullhead class.

But recent pollution controls are working, says Lee Kernen, area fish manager for the Department of Natural Resources at Green Bay, and that means things can only get better in the bay.

"We've found 47 kinds of fish in the Fox River from the De Pere dam to the lower bay," said Kernen. "Muskies, salmon, trout, walleyes—you name it.

"A half-dozen years ago it was pretty much just carp and bullheads," he added. "The water quality is better, no doubt about it. Pollution abatement is working."

Kernen said a DNR manpower shortage prevented major study of the bay until the last couple years, "but we do know that the Fox River is vastly improved over what it was 10 years ago."

Paper mills along the Fox usually get the most blame for polluting the river and the bay, but, said Kernen, "you can't just put the finger on the paper mills; a lot of communities have been cleaning up, too."

Kernen admits the bay still is a far cry from being pollution-free, but he adds, "I think improved fishing will show that all this fuss and money spent on cleaning up the Fox is paying off.

"Right now, about all the species of fish the average person would be familiar with can be found in the bay," he said. "That doesn't mean you can catch trout and salmon on a dock in Green Bay, but the fish are there," even if not in great numbers.

He said there are a couple of major obstacles in Green Bay's comeback to sportsfishing status.

"First, the bay has been and still is polluted," he said. "Granted, it's not as bad as it was, but it's still polluted.

"Second, there's the alewife population. Alewives have added a new dimension. They definitely are in competition with fish such as perch, for example."

Perch fishing in the bay has tapered off since a boom in summer of 1974 which followed many lean years.

"We really don't know why it was so good that summer, but we think it was higher water which flooded some west shore areas," Kernen said. "Perch probably used these otherwise inaccessible areas to spawn and pull off a successful hatch.

"The trend is for the bay to continually get better, but I think we'll have to learn to live with the ups and downs. Maybe perch fishing in '76 won't be that good, but maybe it will be better in '77."

Perch is not the only species abundant in the bay. There is good bass and northern pike fishing in some spots along Door County, and there are heavy concentrations of pike along the west shore between Green Bay and Marinette.

There are fish available in the bay, said Kernen, "but many people prefer to chase trout in the big lake. I think if more people tried the bay, they might be pleasantly surprised."

Last May, the DNR stocked 60,000 chinook in the Fox River, but Kernen said he's not sure what the return will be in future years.

"I suppose if we got five per cent back, I'd be happy," he said. "The fish we put in were only a couple of inches long."

Problems of alewives, pollution, PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) contamination and high carp population remain, he said, "but it's better than it was, and I think the future for Green Bay fishing will be nothing but brighter."

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