

Lake Huron Goes 'Back to Nature' as Native Fish Species Rebound

By Amy Polk

Anglers fishing in Lake Huron can expect to catch smaller and leaner salmon for years to come. They also will find more of the kinds of species that once ruled the waters before exotic fish invaded the Great Lakes. Populations of alewife, the primary forage fish for salmon, have crashed, leaving millions of salmon struggling to find a meal.

Lake trout, yellow perch, walleye, and other native species are expected to become more abundant as the Chinook or "King" salmon, which has been the lake's predominant predator since the 1960s, become fewer and smaller. Pacific salmon, such as Coho and Chinook salmon, were introduced to the Great Lakes 40 years ago to control invasive alewives while creating a sport fishery. By the 1960s, as alewife populations climbed and the invasive sea lamprey killed the lake trout, the lakes had virtually no sport fishery.

Stocking salmon killed two birds with one stone: It cut the number of alewives, which by then comprised 90 percent of the biomass of the Great Lakes. It also launched the rise of a great sport fishery that renewed anglers' interest in the Great Lakes.

"It was a combination that fed a \$1 billion fishing industry," said Jim Johnson, manager

of the Department of Natural Resources' Alpena Fishery Research Station. "We could not have had any idea what would happen next."

Mr. Johnson was speaking to a group of about 50 in Cheboygan on Thursday, April 21, at one of six informational presentations about Lake Huron's present and future status. The last report was Saturday, April 30, in Oscoda.

The crux of Mr. Johnson's message was that anglers may no longer see the 20- to 30-pound Chinook in Lake Huron. Salmon here are already showing signs of malnutrition, and many have headed to Lake Michigan to find alewives.

Based on what they now know, anglers can expect salmon around 10 pounds or lighter, and a more diverse fish population, Mr. Johnson said. What was once an artificial system, dependent on two exotics, the alewife and salmon, may be reverting back to a more natural fishery.

Biologists, however, seem stumped by what the future holds and how to manage it. They are looking for guidance from public opinion and nature.

"We used to play God on Lake Huron and we can't do that anymore," Mr. Johnson said. "I think it will become more like Lake Superior, where we can regulate it and nudge it a little, but we can't control it.

Too many things have happened."

Alewives in Decline

Alewives, a small, silvery ocean fish, entered the Great Lakes by traveling down the St. Lawrence Seaway from the Atlantic Ocean, then through the Welland Canal, a manmade link between lakes Ontario and Erie. Conditions in the Great Lakes were perfect for the proliferation of alewives. By the 1960s, they had almost no natural predators. The lakes' main predator, lake trout, were nearly wiped out by over fishing and the sea lamprey. Lampreys penetrated the upper Great Lakes via the Welland Canal, from Lake Ontario, where they have always been present. Alewives grew in such numbers that other fish species comprised only about 10 percent of all the fish in the lakes.

Once thought harmless, biologists now believe alewives prey on native species like young perch and walleye. They also cut the survival rates in the predatory fish that eat them by causing early mortality syndrome (EMS). Alewives contain an enzyme that destroys thiamin, an essential nutrient needed for the survival of young fish.

In the mid-1960s, former DNR Fisheries Chief Howard Tanner devised a salmon stocking program that would take advantage of the ready and seemingly endless food supply available to them. Pacific

salmon collected from the West Coast were introduced to the lakes, and the returning adults began a stocking program that pumps up to three million hungry salmon into Lake Huron every year. Lakes Michigan and Huron together receive nine million salmon each year.

Alewives and rainbow smelt, another exotic fish, replaced native herring and other native minnows as the preferred prey fish for Lake Huron's larger predatory fish. By the late 1980s, alewives became Huron's dominant prey fish. Alewives are the favorite food of Chinook salmon, but since 1997 have been declining

in number owing to a number of factors, Mr. Johnson said. Harsh winters caused huge die-offs. Exotic zebra and quagga mussels are trapping most of the nutrients once available to alewives at the bottom of the lakes, and predation on alewives by salmon has increased substantially.

By 2004, biologists declared the Lake Huron alewife population had "collapsed completely," Mr. Johnson said.

"No biologist working around the Great Lakes ever anticipated that alewives would collapse, and no biologist ever

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Thirty Years for Mayor Doud

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She taught third grade at Ottawa Elementary School in Petoskey for two years, then taught kindergarten on Mackinac Island for four years, resigning in 1974. That same year, she was appointed to the City Council to fulfill the term of Dennis Brodeur, who was retiring, and a year later, she ran successfully for mayor, replacing Clem Gunn.

Mr. Brodeur, who owns the Mustang Bar, was on hand Sunday to offer his congratulations.

During her first year, she worked at fostering communi-

cation between organizational bodies on the Island and the public. She also worked at city planning, and on increasing the responsibility of the City Council and other elected officials.

Being elected mayor of a place like Mackinac Island does not come without problems, and Mayor Doud addressed some of those issues Sunday.

"The smaller the town, the greater the factions," she said. "But you need to rise above and look for the common good. I enjoy it, enjoy serving the people, and it's been my life."



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