

Big Issues

In a state where angling has near-religion status, fisheries management has always fostered lively debate. Here are five major issues being discussed by anglers and DNR fisheries managers.

1. Experimental regulations

These harvest regulations are tailored to individual lakes and streams and different fish species. On Kandiyohi County's Long Lake, for instance, all walleyes between 16 and 20 inches must be immediately released.



In-Fisherman, Inc.

Is the gain of making fish bigger worth the pain of letting them go?

Biologists believe that limiting harvest of some sizes of fish is the most effective way to improve the average size of fish that anglers catch. Under the direction of the Fishing Roundtable, a group representing fishing interests, the DNR has placed experimental regulations on 90 lakes and 25 streams and rivers.

Issues: Some anglers don't want to release keeper-sized fish. Other anglers say it's worth releasing those fish in order to catch bigger ones in the future. Some resort owners believe the regulations drive away customers. Other resort owners see the regulations as the best way to increase fish size and attract future customers.

Meanwhile, we continue to learn which regulations work best for various waters and species.

2. Bag limits

We want to be able to explain why Minnesota's bag limits are what they are. Right now, that's difficult. Many bag limits were set more than 50 years ago. No one can recall why, for example, the crappie limit was set at 15.

We are currently examining the biological and social ramifications of existing and proposed bag limits. And we are gathering input from anglers and others.

Issues: Because only a small fraction of anglers ever catches a bag limit or even near a limit on a given day, lowering limits by just one or two fish usually does little to reduce harvest (though there are some exceptions). Still, many anglers support moderately decreasing bag limits to promote conservation.

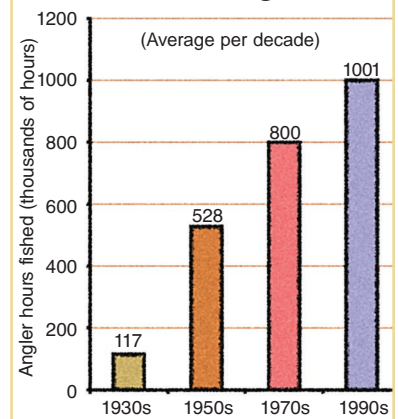
3. More pressure, better gear

Fishing pressure has continued to increase since the 1950s. Though the number of anglers is up only 15 percent since then, there appears to be a dramatic increase in the average number of days each angler fishes. On Lake Winnibigoshish, for example, the number of angler hours fished per year nearly doubled from the 1950s to the 1990s.

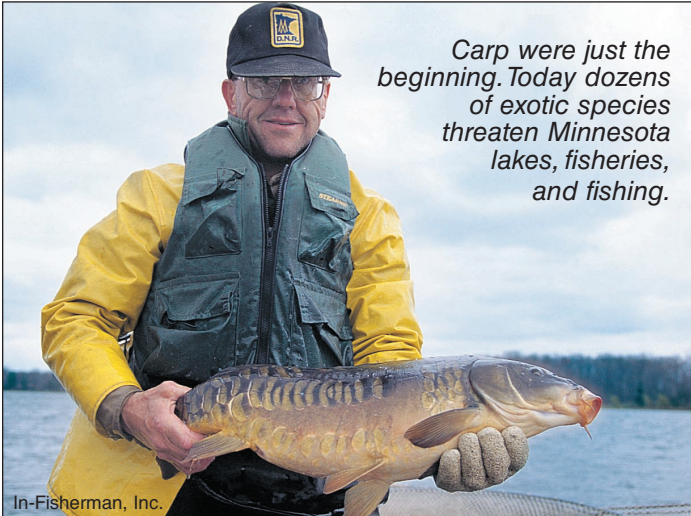
Meanwhile, continual improvements in fishing gear have made anglers more effective at finding and catching fish. Anglers have graduated from rowboats to comfortable fishing rigs, from steel poles to graphite rods, from braided Dacron to monofilament, and from using a rock on a string for finding lake depths to using sophisticated depth finders and fish locators.

As fishing pressure and technological advances increase, the number of fishing waters remains constant. Something has

Growing Fishing Pressure on Lake Winnibigoshish



Minnesota DNR



Carp were just the beginning. Today dozens of exotic species threaten Minnesota lakes, fisheries, and fishing.

to give. On many lakes, it now takes longer to catch fish—and the average fish caught is smaller—than was true 50 years ago. In other words, the size of the pie hasn't changed, but each slice is getting smaller.

Issue: Should we impose limits on technology to protect fish from overharvest? Should such limits be voluntary, and, if so, would enough anglers comply to make a difference? Or is the sacrifice not worth the benefit for most anglers?

4. Exotic species

Harmful aquatic animal and plant species such as the zebra mussel, round goby, spiny water flea, and ruffe increasingly threaten to permanently harm Minnesota's fish populations and fishing. Zebra mussels, which consume food at the base of the food chain, recently invaded one of Minnesota's inland waters, Lake Zumbro, for the first time. Spiny water fleas are now clogging fishing tackle on Lake Superior charters. And several new species of destructive Asian carp are poised to enter Minnesota



Opening day on Lake Mille Lacs: More anglers are fishing more often, putting increasing pressure on Minnesota's limited fish populations.

from southern states via the Mississippi River. These and other species could displace native fish species and alter the food chain that supports game fish.

Issue: If anglers and boaters don't do more to prevent the spread of exotics—like removing plants from boats and draining livewells before leaving a lake—then Minnesota's fish populations and fishing are bound to suffer.

5. Accelerated Walleye Program

In the 1990s, in an effort to stock more efficiently, we scaled back on our walleye fingerling stocking. These reductions convinced some anglers that walleye populations in Minnesota's stocked lakes were declining.

On average, walleye populations in stocked lakes have actually been increasing (see chart, page 11). But walleye numbers on some lakes did drop, raising public concern. In 1999, using additional funding from the state legislature, we began the Accelerated Walleye Program. Over the past two years, local fisheries managers have carried out the program to:

1. increase acreage for natural ponds used to produce fingerlings by roughly 5,000 acres
2. increase by 23 percent (88,000 lbs in 1999 to 108,500 lbs in 2000) the pounds of fingerlings produced from state rearing ponds, despite poor rearing conditions caused by mild winters
3. increase walleye fingerling stocking quotas on 90 lakes
4. increase walleye population abundance goals on 58 lakes
5. solicit public input on 141 lake management plans
6. purchase walleyes from commercial growers to supplement our production.

The main thrust of the sped-up walleye program is to add more walleye fingerlings on lakes where stocking will have the best chance of improving fishing.

Issue: We are committed to finding lakes that will benefit from increased stocking and to stock more walleyes there. However, years of evaluations and research have proven that increased stocking won't improve fishing on every lake. That's why a main component of the accelerated program is to evaluate the stocking we do.

Fisheries managers will continue to review historical lake survey information and meet with local anglers to determine which lakes have the best potential to produce more walleyes. And fisheries managers will evaluate how well increased stocking works on those lakes to see if it's worth continuing to stock at higher levels.

