The Bottom Line

RECREATION WORTH PAYING FOR!

CASE STUDY: Sauk Rapids Area Fisheries

For Sauk Rapids Area Fisheries Manager Joe Stewig, old data is a bit like an old fish that's been in the freezer too long – it probably won't pass the smell test, and you wouldn't want to serve it to friends.

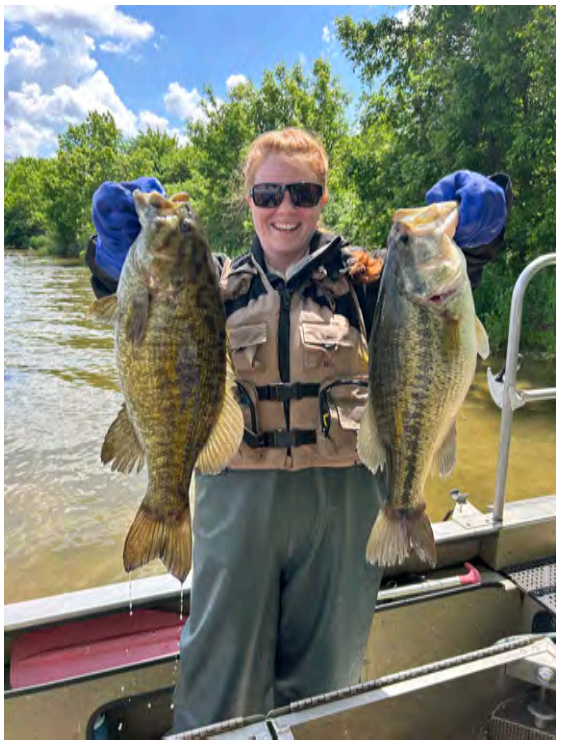
But increasingly during the past five to 10 years, old data is about the only kind Stewig has had to base fisheries management decisions on.

Take lake surveys, for instance. The primary tool that guides fish management, a lake survey consists of periodic monitoring of fish populations, water chemistry and fish habitat.

Prior to 1995, the Sauk Rapids area fisheries station was able to survey lakes about once every five years. Now, as a result of fewer resources, it's about once every 10 years with some not being surveyed at all resulting in fewer lakes being surveyed. The health of a lake and its fishery is the result of numerous variables, and a lot can change in a decade.

One of those variables is angler pressure, which is measured by a creel survey. Ideally, Stewig says, there should be at least one creel survey each year on at least one of the roughly 120 lakes in his area. Because of limited funds and staff, only three have been conducted since 2005.

"From what we can gather, we're maintaining some high quality fisheries in this area," Stewig says. "But increasingly, we're sort of shooting in the dark on some of this stuff. We"re forced to rely more on educated guesswork, and less on timely information. You can only do that so long before you start missing the mark in a way that impacts the fishery."



A smallmouth bass (left) and largemouth bass (right) collected during a bass survey.

The bottom line?

Good fishing requires good fisheries management decisions based on sound science and timely data, data that is becoming scarce due to inadequate funding.

WHAT WE DO: Sauk Rapids Area Fisheries Highlights

The Minnesota DNR's Sauk Rapids Fisheries Area includes Wright and Sherburne Counties and portions of Stearns County. Excellent fishing opportunities are available for smallmouth bass (Mississippi River), muskellunge (Sauk River Chain of Lakes, Sugar Lake), walleye (Sauk River Chain of Lakes, Clearwater Lake) and bass/panfish (numerous lakes).



- Manage the fisheries of 120 lakes, 60 miles of the Mississippi River, and 200 miles of moderate size rivers (North Fork Crow, Sauk & Elk).
- Manage one lake (Big Watab) and five streams for trout.
- Stock and manage Sugar Lake (Wright County) and the Sauk River Chain of (Stearns County) with pure strain muskellunge.
- Stock 50 lakes with walleye (fry and fingerlings).
- Produce and stock approx 6,000 lbs of walleye fingerlings per year.
- Monitor over 30 fishing tournaments per year.
- Conduct 15 - 20 lake surveys per year and collect fish for contaminant testing to assist Dept. of Health and PCA in determining safe consumption advisories.
- Conduct shoreline restoration projects to improve water quality and aquatic habitat.
- Conduct research including: experimental panfish regulations, population estimates for northern pike, walleye, and muskellunge.
- Conduct creel surveys to examine catch and harvest of popular sport fish as well as use of technology (FFS).
- Provide outreach to schools, watershed districts, lake associations, and rural communities.
- Update lake management plans in a timely manner.
- Survey and document aquatic vegetation and make conservation recommendations.
- Manage 14 shorefishing sites to provide better angling access.
- Manage 11 aquatic management areas, five dams, sites of special significance, easement holdings and islands in the Mississippi River.
- Monitor commercial fishing activity.
- Monitor aeration sites and provide equipment to cooperating groups.
- Monitor winter dissolved oxygen levels.
- Reclaim ponds for walleye rearing.
- Oversee 25 lakes and one river (Mississippi) with special or experimental fishing regulations.
- Area waters have produced four state-record fish.
- Provide high quality customer service, with quick response time to requests, e-mails, phone calls.

Sauk Rapids Area Fisheries Office



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