

The History of Fishing in Minnesota



Fishing, a Minnesota Tradition

Would you like to go fishing? Would you like to teach others about Minnesota's fisheries resources? Minnesota, known as the Land of 10,000 Lakes, is the perfect place to start! Within the state boundaries, there are 11,842 lakes larger than ten acres and more than 15,000 miles of streams and rivers.

As you embark on a Minnesota fishing trip, you'll take part in a tradition that spans thousands of years!

Subsistence Fishing

Minnesota has a rich fishing history. As early as 11,500 years ago, people first arrived in present-day Minnesota. Not much is known about these ancient cultures, but evidence buried beneath earthen mounds reveals they fished here. Excavations of prehistoric sites in and around early settlements have unearthed thin, inch-long, J-shaped artifacts that appear to have been chipped stone fish hooks.

Approximately 3,000 years ago, Dakota tribes that lived in the Midwest migrated northward through what is now Minnesota to the southern and western areas of Lake Superior. The Dakota fished the area's many lakes, streams, and rivers. What they hunted or gathered depended on the season, but fish could be angled, netted, or speared year-round.

Sometime around the year 900, a group of Anishinaabeg, or Ojibwe, people began migrating from the east coast of Canada. They traveled along the St. Lawrence River, along the shores of what is now Lake Michigan and the Canadian border, to the waters of Lake Superior or *Gitchi Gummi*, as they called it, meaning big water.

The Ojibwe found an abundance of fish in the area's waters. Ojibwe fishermen used large birchbark canoes and nets made from twisted and knotted strands of willow bark to catch lake trout, whitefish, and sturgeon. In winter, they used hand-carved wooden decoys as bait and speared fish through holes chopped in the ice. By the mid-1700s, the Ojibwe people had settled in what is now central Minnesota. Like the Dakota, they subsisted on what the land and waters produced throughout the seasons.

The first Europeans known to travel into Minnesota were French fur traders from Quebec. They began exploring and trading with native peoples in 1655. When they returned to Montreal, they told of the riches of Minnesota country. They were amazed at the abundance of fish in Minnesota waters. Most of their early settlements were built on the shores of rivers or lakes, not just as a source of water, but also a readily available source of fish. Fish was a diet staple for many of the settlers who came to Minnesota from Scandinavia. Having brought a rich fishing tradition with them, they readily adapted to fishing in Minnesota waters.

The La Pointe Treaty of 1854 ceded from the Ojibwe to the United States the entire Minnesota shoreline of Lake Superior. When this treaty was adopted in September of 1854, dozens of men staked claims along the North Shore—primarily where copper deposits were thought to exist—and at the mouths of the larger streams. Some prospectors began commercial fishing at several sites on Lake Superior during this period. The 1857 U. S. census indicates ten commercial fishermen were operating in St. Louis County and 89 in Lake County.

Commercial Fishing

Commercial fishing on Lake Superior flourished during the early decades of the twentieth century. Norwegian immigrants dominated the industry, although a number of Swedish and Finnish immigrants also cast their nets into the icy waters. Annual catch rates varied over the years, but the all-time record occurred in 1915, when almost 10,000 tons of fish were harvested out of Duluth alone. By the 1920s, catches began to decrease as a result of over-harvest and the accidental introduction of the sea lamprey from the Atlantic Ocean—the sea lamprey feeds parasitically on the blood of lake trout. Decreased catches caused many commercial harvesters to find alternate sources of income. Those that continued fishing caught herring, lake trout, chubs, and ciscoes. In ensuing years, populations of the lake's commercial species steadily declined due to pollution from lakeshore industry, over-harvesting, and the sea lamprey, all of which upset the ecosystem of the lake.

In 2006, 25 commercial fishermen were licensed for Lake Superior. They fish mostly herring, which they sell to North Shore restaurants and smokehouses during the summer.

In 1964, approximately 50 commercial harvesters operated on the Mississippi River and the state's inland lakes. In 2006, there were approximately 56 commercial licenses held in Minnesota. Commercial harvesters catch and sell about three million pounds of fish each year—a decrease from the approximately five million pounds taken in the mid-1960s. Commercial harvest on the Mississippi River suffered as consumer demand for carp, catfish,

and other species began declining in the late 1970s when health researchers warned that some fish carried contaminants (mercury and PCBs) harmful to human health. Today, anglers are more confident in keeping their catch for a meal because point source pollution in our waters has been reduced, and the Minnesota Department of Health provides statewide and site-specific guidelines for the safe eating of fish.

Popular Pastime

Today, Minnesota is known nationally and internationally for its wonderful sport fishing opportunities. How popular is sport fishing in Minnesota? Consider the following: as many as two million anglers cast their lines into Minnesota waters each year. Approximately 29 percent of Minnesotans fish. The Minnesota DNR sells as many as 1,500,000 fishing licenses each year, with the remaining anglers being children under 16 years of age who, under current regulations, don't require fishing licenses. Additionally, the DNR manages 5,400 game fish lakes, 3,700 miles of trout streams, 192 lakes for trout, and 15,000 miles of streams and rivers.

Rod, reel, boat, and tackle manufacturers are found throughout Minnesota. Indeed, many of today's larger boat, motor, and tackle manufacturers started their operations in Minnesota.

Managing Our Fisheries Resources

In 1931, Governor Harold Stassen created the Department of Conservation to care for the state's rich resources. In 1971, the name was changed to the Department of Natural Resources. Its purpose has always been to care for the state's rich resources and to preserve them for present and future generations. Management, research, and education are important elements in preserving the state's natural heritage. The Minnesota DNR "extends" its work force through partnerships with private individuals and hundreds of citizen and stakeholder groups. Their efforts have been responsible for natural resource achievements that would have been impossible otherwise. As physical, social, economic, and political changes occur in

the state, the Minnesota DNR faces constant and ever-changing challenges. In addition to challenges inherent in natural resource management, reaching a balance between sustainability of natural resources, and development that may affect those resources increases the management role of the Minnesota DNR and the stewardship role of the citizens of Minnesota. Although the Minnesota DNR exists to conserve and manage the state's resources, it also oversees outdoor recreation opportunities and commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life. The Minnesota DNR strives to conserve natural systems and maintain biodiversity to ensure the needs of current and future generations, and requires sharing the role of stewardship with citizens and partners working together to address interests that sometimes conflict.

To that end, it's important to remember that the fish in Minnesota's waters are a limited resource. As angler pressure increases, the number of fishing waters remains constant. Fluctuations in seasonal and annual cycles also affect the fish that inhabit the waters. An environmentally literate citizenry is needed to ensure the sustainability of the resource. We all must work together, pooling our awareness, knowledge, and skills to initiate and practice good stewardship.

A Changing Fishery

Minnesota is currently home to 160 different species of fish, 141 of which are native to our state. The Minnesota DNR has introduced some species of fish to Minnesota waters as a management decision over the years. In each case, this was done to increase or provide a recreational fishery where none had previously existed, but where the environment could sustain one. Of the 160 fish species, twelve are considered nuisance exotics. All nuisance exotics were introduced by people—whether they released a pet goldfish or dumped bilge water from trans-Atlantic shipping vessels. Additionally, as climate changes affect the temperatures of Minnesota waters, the number of species present in the state will continue to change. Although this represents a natural phenomenon, we must diligently protect our waters from future exotic nuisance species introductions and their rapid impact on native fish populations.

The MinnAqua Program Teaches Youth

In 1989, a needs assessment was completed for the development and design of an angling education program that would educate and promote the importance of Minnesota's fisheries resource, management, regulations, and the stewardship roles of anglers and other users of the resource. With an ever-changing landscape and increasing population, recreational angling remains a pastime that brings friends and families together in Minnesota. The continuing education of users remains a priority for the Minnesota DNR.

The MinnAqua Program offers basic instruction in lake and stream ecology, fish population dynamics, water quality, and sport fishing skills, connecting participants to Minnesota's aquatic resources through the lifelong activity of fishing. Participants understand the vital roles that clean water, healthy watersheds, aquatic habitat, and quality fisheries play in their lives, and how their own decisions and activities impact water quality, local watersheds and fisheries. They learn to make informed decisions and develop skills for using resources in a sustainable way.

Would you like to teach others about fishing, but don't know how to begin? The *MinnAqua Leader's Guide* is one resource that will assist you in your efforts to teach Minnesota citizens about the natural resources of fisheries.

Minnesota's rich angling heritage also builds bridges to new and culturally diverse communities, which have their own strong fishing traditions and a similar appreciation and enthusiasm for the fisheries resource. Due to the historic and continuing importance of fishing to the culture, economy, and quality of life in Minnesota, education on fish and aquatic ecology is relevant and vital to ensure that we all know how to use and enjoy the resource in a sustainable way. With success in this endeavor, many future generations of Minnesotans will have the opportunity to value and enjoy our state's rich fishing heritage.

Become part of fishing history and tradition in Minnesota: take someone fishing!