

## Detroit River Spawn

(Since the following articles that appeared in the Heritage News-Herald newspapers deal with concerns of our members, the newspaper has given us permission to reprint them)

*By Jim Barta, Staff Writer*

When it comes to speculating on various things that occur in the outdoors, most of us have to do just that, speculate. For example, I've always had my own ideas concerning the where, why, how and when, walleyes spawn.

Most of these thoughts were gained through interviews with professionals in the fishing industry, but a lot were simply my own gut feelings. Well, after attending a meeting of the Lake Erie-Lake St. Clair Advisory Committee, and hearing the concerns about declining walleye populations in Lake Erie, I decided to go right to the top and talk to those who should know the facts.

I spoke with Gary Towns, Fisheries Supervisor for the Michigan DNR and Bob Hass, Chief Biologist and one of the state's most respected authorities on habitat.

As it turns out, those big spring fish in the Detroit River may not come from where we've always assumed they did.

The good spawning rivers are generally those richer in phytoplankton and zooplankton, according to the scientists.

The Maumee River and bay as well as the Saginaw River and bay are good examples of that.

The Detroit, Huron and Clinton rivers are poor providers of spawning habitat.

When asked about the primary spawning areas for Lake Erie, Hass said that the Maumee and Sandusky Rivers in Ohio as well as the Grand River in Ontario are huge contributors.

"One of the reasons there are so many walleyes in the Detroit River in the spring," said Towns. "Is because we get unimaginable numbers of fish coming from across Lake Huron, the St. Clair River, and Lake St. Clair to swim through the Detroit to reach spawning areas in Lake Erie.

"Some may come from as far as Lake Huron and swim all the way to the Maumee.

"We'll tag a fish in Erie while it's in shallow spawning and find it back in Lake Huron just a couple days later.

"With only a few exceptions, these fish are just passing through the Detroit River to spawn in Lake Erie.

"Proof of that can be found in the sex of the various schools of fish we catch," Towns continued.

"If you think about it, most of the days on the river this spring were spent catching either all males or all females; rarely both.

"If they were spawning, we'd get an ample mixture of both. Plus, we'd catch plenty of fish in a particular spot one day and they'd be gone the next.

"If they were spawning, they'd be there for a while."

Well, the information these two biologists were throwing at me was coming faster than I could digest and is far too extensive to do justice in only one article.

Shortly, I'll complete a piece on what these two professionals as well as the Lake Erie Advisory Committee is recommending to Michigan's Natural Resource Commission regarding regulations for next year's walleye fishery.

With the walleye numbers on a steady slide, these folks have some real interesting changes in store for us.

## Part II

In recent years, we've had a tendency to sit back on our boat seats and grin proudly at the world-class walleye fishery that Lake Erie has offered. And rightfully so!

Nowhere else in the country offers the quality of fishing for sheer size or numbers of walleyes than this shallowest of the Great Lakes.

But, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: Lake Erie's walleye population is in a steep decline.

The number of 'eyes calling this water home is presently a small fraction of what it once was.

In 1988, there were approximately 80 million walleyes in the lake, which biologists readily admit was considered far too many to be supported by the area.

By 2002, that number had dropped to only 23 million.

In 2004, it's feared that the continuing decline will reach a mere 19 million fish.

It's believed the loss of walleyes in Lake Erie is due to several factors with poor spawning success getting the bulk of the blame.

"The weather has been terribly rough on the fish for the past several years," said Gary Towns, Fisheries Supervisor with the DNR.

"Once the eggs are deposited, they're completely at the mercy of the elements. If it's real windy, the eggs are scattered and not allowed to mature.

"Even after the blow stops, the spawn have to survive after being buried by sediment stirred up by the waves. It doesn't take much dirt and sediment to smother the eggs.

"Another factor is the gizzard shad.

"We know the shad compete with walleye fry for zooplankton. During warm winters, there is a high survival of gizzard shad, which not only compete with the walleyes for food, but also eat the walleye fry itself.

"That's one of the reasons I believe we generally have a much better walleye year-class after a cold winter.

"We had a lot of high hopes coming out of this past one. Especially with the maturing of the 1999 year class making the 2003 abundance of spawners the highest since 1992.

"Following most real cold winters, we have a large die-off of shad much like we experienced this past spring.

"Unfortunately, our recent spring weather was so unstable and windy, that what could have been a banner year class of walleyes may have been a bust.

"We believe the 2001 year-class was way below normal," continued Thomas.

"And to make matters worse, the 2000 and 2002 year-class was virtually non-existent."

To determine the status of Erie's walleye fishery, a number of things are looked at.

For one, a creel census is taken at various ports along the lake.

The information gathered here tells researchers the number of fish taken per angler for each hour of fishing effort.

For example, in the 80s, the catch rate of walleyes in Lake Erie was six fish per 10-hours of effort.

During 2002, that rate dropped off to only three fish per 10 hours.

The good news is that even this is considered to be world-class walleye action compared to anywhere else.

Another sampling of data comes by dragging nets across various areas in search of young, recently hatched walleye fry.

"We tested between 40 and 50 locations in Lake Erie last year," stated Mike Thomas, DNR Fisheries Biologist. "For all that effort, we only caught four walleye fry.

"That goes to show you just how bad the spawn was last year."

To combat the decline in walleyes, the Lake Erie Committee, is considering a number of hard choices.

This committee is made up of a bi-national group of fisheries managers from Ontario and the four states that surround the lake.

Its responsibility is to research and then recommend changes in regulations that will maintain and support a healthy fishery.

As a member of the Lake Erie-Lake St. Clair Advisory Committee to the Michigan Natural Resources Commission, I had an opportunity to evaluate, discuss and debate the data presented by our DNR recently.

Our assignment?

To determine which of several options would lower the number of walleyes taken from the Michigan waters of Lake Erie nearly 50 percent while causing the least problems to our anglers.

Single item changes were studied as were a combination of factors.

For example, increasing the size limit from 13 inches to 17 would, by itself, reduce the number of fish taken by 47 percent.

Leaving the size at 13 inches but reducing the bag limit to two per day reduced the harvest to 39 percent. Similarly, closing the walleye season on Lake Erie during April, May and June would cut back the catch 51 percent.

Of course, things like business loss, charter fishing decline and less family time spent on the water as well as an entire list of other things had to be considered.

The combination changes that would reach a catch reduction of at least 40 percent included options such as: minimum size limit 13-inches; one fish limit and no closed season; MSL 13 inches with a six-fish limit and closed season April through June; MSL 15 inches, three fish limit and no closed season; or MSL 16 inches, five fish limit, closed season April and May.

Although none of these options seemed great, a compromised recommendation was finally reached. It was agreed that, although it wouldn't quite attain the desired reduction, the committee's recommendation for next year would be a minimum size limit of 15 inches, a five fish creel limit and a season closure of April and May.

This reduction offer will be shown to Ontario and Lake Erie's surrounding states in hopes that they too will follow along with significant cutbacks of their own.

Two years ago, in an effort to increase the walleye population, each state and Ontario took serious hits in their total allowable catch.

Michigan, for example, went from a 10 fish limit to six, while the other states followed with steps of their own.

Ontario cut its commercial netting creel by over 50 percent and is now being asked to cut another 40 percent away.

Fortunately, all is not bad news.

Consider that in 1976, there was estimated to be a mere 17 million walleyes in Lake Erie.

Sometime in the 1980s, that number climbed to an all time high of 80 million.

Hopefully, with a little help from anglers, commercial netters and the weather, we can build this fishery back up.

And remember, it's still the world's best.