

The following article was posted on the "Walleye List" www.walleyelist.com by Bob Hesse

I contacted Fred Snyder, a biologist with Ohio Sea Grant who has studied Lake Erie since 1974 (and who is a dedicated fisherman), and asked him about the Lake Erie spawn fishing debate and he responded. He gave me permission to use his statement, it is very long (and very interesting). I think Fred has to be considered an authority on Lake Erie and its fish and I have found him to be very honest and open about the lake every time I have questioned him. Not only that but he's a nice guy :-)

Bob

Fred said:

"I do not believe that Lake Erie sport fishing, as it currently is regulated by the states, has a negative impact on our sport fish populations. Reasons?

The Great Lakes Fishery Commission uses population data supplied by the states and Ontario to set walleye harvest quotas, aimed at protecting the integrity of these populations. They determine an allowable harvest that protects a spawning stock large enough to maintain the population. Ohio, the largest sport harvester by far, is consistently BELOW its allotted quota each year.

Are we overharvesting? In any overharvested fish population, the most desirable fish (big-uns) are removed at a rate that crops the population down to the point where relatively few keepers remain.. The population is cropped down to the minimum acceptable size - i.e., it seems nothing but little ones are left. Clearly, survival that allows successful reproduction is the critical point. Is survival adequate?

PWT anglers just brought in 346 walleyes weighing over 10 lbs. each. To provide that quality of fishing requires large numbers of fish to survive to old age. And this harvest of older, trophy size walleye has been consistent for many years - there are always more.

Every time the PWT comes to western Lake Erie (I think it's about nine times now), they always set big fish records. If sport fishing was hurting the population, shouldn't they be catching fewer big ones, not more of them?

I also submit that these larger walleye need to be caught if we are to gain maximum benefit from the fishery. By the time a female has reached 8-10 years old, she has spawned several times, successfully replacing herself (and others). At this age, while her egg numbers may be high, the viability of the eggs has dropped greatly - she's worth less as a spawner than a 4-6 year old female. Look at any hatchery and you won't see a breeder trout over five or six pounds. Much better fry production comes from younger, smaller females, so the hatchery manager gets rid of the big-uns. They aren't worth feeding. In Lake Erie, the best fry production comes from female walleye in the 17-24 inch range. Those are the ones most anglers put in the cooler while releasing the whoppers "to spawn." TV star anglers have done a lot to romanticize this practice.

So should we be restricting fishing during March and April or making anglers throw back walleye in the 17-24 inch range? No.

Remember the allowable harvest concept. Lake Erie has a high rate of fish production, and current regulations keep harvest within the surplus that can be safely removed. Our evidence of this is the overall high survival rate that lets us catch bigger walleye on the average than anywhere else in this country - year after year.

I hope no one is still complaining that overfishing wiped out the huge walleye population we had in the

late 1980s. That population came about from unprecedented hatches that have never been repeated (and these hatches were produced by relatively smaller spawning stocks). It led to an ecologically unbalanced lake. Walleye growth rates began to slow, and forage fish were severely cropped down. Remember trying to get lake shiners for perch fishing in 1988 and 1989? We were all using fatheads and golden shiners. The walleye stock today may be smaller, but it is sustainable.

The biggest problems seem to come from great expectations. Fishing is so good that we expect to slam the walleye every time we go out. But the various stocks move around considerably and continually shift feeding behavior. A couple of slow trips and the cries arise that Lake Erie is fished out. (This also implies great fishing expertise – if they were there, we would catch them. If we made a poor catch, it's because the lake is fished out). Last August and September the message boards were full of complaints that the wildlife agencies were totally wrong about the walleye population and that it was all but gone (oddly, a few folks still did fine in those months). That same population provided fishing this month (April 2002) that has been described as spectacular. It would be an interesting challenge to find another lake anywhere that provides such great walleye fishing year after year, but draws so many angler complaints.

Even in its lower-catch years, Lake Erie has remained the world's most spectacular walleye fishery. And judging from all those fish which reach old age year after year, it's not due to change. Let's relax and enjoy it.

Fred"