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Walleye hatch? We'll get back to you

The 2010 Lake Erie walleye hatch appears to be mediocre at best, which dashes hopes that the lake's stocks, in decline for several years, will stop flirting with a descent to critical levels.

"Things could change between now and August [trawls] when we get broader coverage and we get Ontario's samples as well," said Jeff Tyson, supervisor of the state's Lake Erie Fisheries Research Station at Sandusky. But he noted the July trawls for young-of-year walleyes were "not horribly encouraging, though not a complete bust."

The recent trawls produced preliminary results of just three young walleye per hectare of water [about 2 1/2 acres]. That compares to about three in 2009 and four in 2008, and eight in 2007, the last "average" year. In the mega-class of 2003, the trawls produced 43 young walleye per hectare. It is, thus, "a below-average hatch," said Tyson. July, he added, "is preliminary and the August interagency survey is the official one." However, know that July surveys usually closely track and mimic results found in August, Tyson noted. "There's not much chance of a gangbuster out there."

The supervisor said weather did not seem particularly adverse during spawning season, but he pointed to several environmental and weather factors that could have affected this year's spawning success: High summer temperatures and a very warm lake; tremendous blooms of pea-soupy, toxic blue-green algae, low dissolved oxygen levels in the water, and heavy land runoff of phosphorus, which fuels algae explosions.

"We have some big issues to deal with," Tyson asserted.

The not-good-news report on the walleye hatch is sure to fuel the flames of controversy in fishing circles from now till next spring, when the Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Lake Erie Committee meets to set the annual standing walleye stocks [two-year-old and older fish].

From that standing stock, catch-quotas are derived for each of the lake's jurisdictions, by geographical area controlled. Ohio gets the largest share, closely followed by Ontario, with small shares to Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York.

In 2005, when the mega-class of 2003 entered the scene, the standing stock was set at 68.3 million fish. That dropped to 46.2 million in 2006, 31.9 million in 2007, and 20.6 million in 2008. The slide reflected poor hatches in 2004, 2005, and 2006. The standing stock a year ago was 18.4 million and this year it was set at 19.6 million, the average 2007 class just keeping it afloat along with the remaining 2003 fish.

The 2010 year-class, such as it is, will not be a factor until 2012 at age two, so what about next year?

Good question, and one that Tyson wants to wait to answer until after all survey and harvest data is fed into the computer model that all the agencies' biologists rely on.

The figure that will signal critical times and trigger emergency action - that is, reduced limits - is 15 million walleye in the standing stock. That translates to an Ohio catch-quota of less than a million walleye a year.

The Ohio Division of Wildlife already has a plan, enshrined in the Ohio Administrative Code, that sets hook-and-line daily creel limits. For a standing stock above 15 million - where it is now, though just barely - that means four fish a day in March and April [spawning season] and six a day the rest of the year.

The code prescribes creel limits of four fish in March and April and five the rest of the year if the quota falls between 850,000 and 950,000 fish. It drops to four and four in a 750,000-to-850,000 quota, and just three fish year-round in a



Research vessels such as the Explorer II from the Ohio Division of Wildlife navigate the western basin of Lake Erie to gather data through young-of-year trawls to assess the 2010 walleye hatch.

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650,000-to-750,000 range. At a 550,000-to-650,000 quota, the creel limit is just two year-round. Below that, it is just one.

This year's quota for Ohio was set at 1.1 million walleye, and final catch figures await season's end. But last year the catch was 967,000 [against a quota of 1.25 million] and the year before 1.083 million.

The highest catches occurred in the heydays of 1985 through 1989, about 4.3 million a year. It dropped to about 2 million a year in 1990 to 1994 and never again hit 2 million till 2007, during the reign of the 2003 year mega-class. You can be sure that as the foregoing numbers are circulated, the hue and cry for answers will intensify. The contingent of anglers who believe in spring closing of walleye fishing altogether will crank up their campaign even further. [Biologists contend a female fish removed from the fishery in July is just as "removed" from the stock as one taken in April, and only a small percentage of the annual catch comes in the spring.]

Other factions will point to First Energy's Bay Shore Power Plant, situated as it is on Maumee Bay at the Maumee River mouth and labeled as the fish-killingest plant in Ohio. [The vast majority of the fish it kills are gizzard shad, white perch, and super-abundant emerald shiners, but it does kill some walleye and yellow perch.]

In short, there will be plenty of fodder for the controversy cannons to fire. Two points here:

First, we need to remember that the walleye has been in Lake Erie perhaps since the last Ice Age. It has endured plenty, and its numbers, like those of any species, have cycled up and down. None of which is an excuse to do nothing about the currently low stocks.

But just how much impact does fishing have on the Big Picture? Look at the standing stocks since 2005. Where did 22 million walleye disappear to between 2005 and 2006 when the stocks fell from 68 million to 46 million?

In Ohio we only took a measly 610,000 in 2005 and less than 1.9 million in 2006. Yet from 2006 to 2007 the standing stocked plunged precipitously again from 46 million to about 32 million. It fell another 12 million the next year. All along we only had been taking one to two million fish, sometimes far less. What happened to all those lost tens of millions of walleye? The "Canadians" didn't catch them all. They were held to their quotas too, and their quotas are lower than Ohio's under the GLFC. Write it off to natural mortality - age, disease, and the like.

In short, fishing had little to do with the cycle from high stocks to low. But a string of poor hatches certainly did.

Admittedly, fishing could be a factor in these low-tide days, but the reduced-limits plan already is set in code.

The late Carl Baker, retired supervisor of lake fisheries research for the state, liked to point out too that the sport fishery is somewhat self-limiting. When there are lots of fish, lots of people fish and catch lots fish. When the fish are scarce, far fewer people catch and keep far fewer fish.

My second point refers to Tyson's "big issues," chief among them being the record phosphorus loadings of the western basin this year from the Maumee and Sandusky rivers, and a continuing upward trend in recent years of such loadings.

We spent billions fixing sewage treatment plants and other outlet pipes 30 years ago - the "point sources" of pollution - to get rid of the green algae blooms. The lake got healthy and so did walleye stocks. Now the problem is worse, for green algae were "good" algae; it was a case of too much of a good thing.

The current blue-green algae explosion is too much of a bad thing. The stuff is useless to the lake's food-web and can be toxic. Farmland runoff is thought the major culprit, though some urban runoff and suburban runoff [your lawn chemicals, for instance] also goes into the mix.

It is going to be a complicated fix, one aimed at keeping farm chemicals on the farm as a major part of the solution.

Finishing the rebuilding of city sewers also is called for - Toledo just now is replacing a downtown sewer made of bricks during the Civil War. When it rains too heavily, that sewer, and others like it here and in Detroit [a major source, among others] put our poop in the rivers and ultimately in the lake. Not good.

What we need for Lake Erie is the same kind of all-hands-on-deck effort we see in smaller scale unfolding on the 13,500-acre Grand Lake St. Marys in western Ohio. Same kind of problems. Whether we get that kind of response depends on political will and awareness.

In any case, it is easy to finger Bay Shore Power Plant, or spring walleye fishing as problems. But they can be likened to pneumonia in a patient that has cancer.

A noted outdoors writing colleague, Bob Marshall, has written just that in New Orleans about the Gulf of Mexico-BP oil spill versus the long-term losses to critical wetlands after decades of the nearshore oil industry and channelization of marshes and Mississippi Delta for shipping and flood control. It is a good analogy.

The patient may get past the pneumonia, but the cancer still looms.

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