

A GREAT LAKE

Lake St. Clair fishery still in top health

Most places, the old-timers talk about the good, old days and tell young whippersnappers they should have seen what fishing was like when the codgers were kids.

But listen to Bill Krone of St. Clair Shores talking about Lake St. Clair, a body of water he has been prowling for most of his 74 years.

"Fishing now is so much better than it was in the 1930s and 40s; you can't even compare it," Krone said. "I

was probably 6 when I caught my first smallmouth bass in this lake, and a good day of bass fishing then was 10 or 12. Now, 40 is probably a good average when the bass are spawning, and I know a lot of guys who have caught and released 80-100 smallmouth in

one day."

Lake St. Clair got a lot of bad press last year because of bacterial contamination along its shore. But while the situation ruined a lot of beach parties, the fishery remains in excellent health.

In addition to smallmouth, yellow perch fishing also is spectacular. Not only are numbers up by at least 100 percent over the past five years, so are sizes. Ice fishing is probably the most popular form of angling for perch, and fishermen routinely go home with buckets of 25 or more fish averaging 9 inches. Research trawls by biologists show that the perch are reproducing at a rate that promises even better success for these tasty panfish for at least the next three years.

The most popular game fish in Michigan is the walleye, a so-so fighting fish but one of the tastiest critters in fresh or salt water. Once as abundant in Lake St. Clair as in the legendary fisheries of Lake Erie and Saginaw Bay, walleye numbers have declined 50 percent the past five years.

Mike Thomas, a fisheries biologist at the Department of Natural Resources Lake St. Clair fisheries research center, said the reduction is linked the zebra mussel, a European invader that filters its food from the water and is clearing the once-murky waters that the walleye prefers.

Thomas said walleye numbers are down, but so are complaints from fishermen. He attributes this to the fact that anglers have figured out some of the missing fish haven't simply moved to new areas.

"As the water clears and the weedy areas increase, walleyes move into the



CRAIG PORTER/Detroit Free Press

Hal Ryda of Clinton Township prepares to fish for perch Thursday on Black Creek at Metro Beach. The fish run in from Lake St. Clair.

Lake St. Clair fish safe to eat

The bacteria outbreak that contaminated the waters off Lake St. Clair beaches last summer represents no serious threat to anglers, according to Mike Thomas, a fisheries biologist at the lake's research center.

"We checked on it right away when we heard about the problem. The (Michigan) Health Department told us that there was very little additional danger to anglers from handling the fish or eating them," he said.

Thomas said the Health Department recommended that

fishermen wash their hands after cleaning fish or getting them in lake water, "but that's something they recommend all the time, not just when we have a bacteria outbreak.

"There's always a very slight risk of getting sick from contact with any untreated water, but that doesn't stop us from biting through a wet fishing line, or handling a fish and then picking up a sandwich. I think we all do things like that, but I don't know if I've heard of anyone getting sick from it."

By Eric Sharp

weeds and the deeper channels," he said. "We also believe that a large group of Lake St. Clair walleyes migrate out of the lake in late May and early June into the upper part of the Detroit River and the lower St. Clair River."

But Dan Chimelak of Lakeside Tackle said a big cause of the walleye reduction is the unregulated Indian net fishery allowed on the Canadian side of the lake, especially when a couple of million fish head for the Thames River to spawn each spring.

"We're hurting over this," Chimelak said. "I hear the DNR say our fishermen haven't switched to the new techniques needed to catch walleyes as the lake is changing, and I have to laugh. About the only thing they aren't using out there is hand grenades, and they aren't catching many walleyes.

"But we know that for the past two or three years the Queen in her infinite wisdom has been allowing the Indians to net them without restriction, and now we see them laying trotlines with 1,000 hooks on them. I can't understand it. How can you justify them exercising their traditional rights when it's going to destroy the fishery?"

Another world class fishery in the lake is for muskellunge. Muskie are so reclusive that in many parts of their range catching five fish would constitute anything from a good week to a good season. But on Lake St. Clair, five fish is a good day, and in many of the muskie tournaments anglers land 10 or more in a single day.

In most lakes, the predominant members of the pike family are muskie or their smaller cousins, northern pike. That's because pike hatch about three weeks earlier than muskie each spring,

and when the muskie eggs hatch the tiny fry make a dinner for a baby pike. But Lake St. Clair is big enough that muskie and pike can inhabit different areas: the pike in the shallow bays and the muskies the open waters offshore.

The average size of Lake St. Clair muskies is also increasing after dropping for a decade, and Don Miller, one of the lake's best-known muskie guides, said the turnaround is the result of the DNR raising the size limit in Michigan to 42 inches and convincing the Canadians to go to 40.

Miller said, "We're seeing more 30-pound fish now than we've seen for a long time, and I think this year we'll see a nice increase in the number of 35-pounders. We're going to see even more when the Canadians go to a 42-inch limit in 1996 or '97. We're also convinced most people that catch-and-release is the way to go. There's no reason to kill a big muskie, a fish may 25, 30 years old, when you can release it and catch it again."

But like many fishermen, he worries that last summer's high bacteria counts might recur this year, and he blames state and local governments for the problem.

"I really had to laugh last summer when we had the problem with the high bacteria counts," Miller said. "Some officials in different cities that dump sewage into the lake were trying to blame it on seagulls. Seagulls have been taking dumps on our beaches for thousands of years without causing any problems. But you ask Harrison Township and some of those other communities how much they dump into the rivers that feed the lake."

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