



## Lake Erie / Lake St. Clair Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee

Established by the Department of Natural Resources to improve and maintain the fishery resources of Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair, and the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers through better communication and partnership.

### **Meeting Notes Belle Isle Nature Zoo 176 Lakeside Drive, Detroit, MI 48207 September 24, 2019**

#### **Welcome and introductions (Jerry Comfort and Tim Muir, Co-Chairs and Jim Francis, DNR)**

- Everyone introduced themselves.

#### **Review the agenda and meeting minutes from March 2019 (All)**

- Following the last meeting, Frank Corl sent a letter to the NRC on behalf of the committee, expressing concerns that the new statewide yellow perch bag limit was not based on science. A copy of the letter was shared with the committee.
- Jim shared a short promotional video, "Walleye Fish-Off." This was a friendly fishing contest between DNR-Fisheries staff and Detroit Red Wings staff. Thanks to Capt. Jerry Comfort for his assistance – and for the record, Jerry's boat won. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG0-UM7En9Q>
- Jim shared another video showing walleye on Lake Erie being implanted with acoustic tags. Thanks to Captains John Giszczak and Trevor Fox for their efforts catching the fish to be tagged. A total of 41 walleye were tagged as part of a lakewide study of walleye movements.
- Jim Felgenauer was unanimously elected the new Chair, taking over at the Spring 2020 meeting.

#### **Belle Isle and other access concerns (All)**

- A letter was sent to the Chief of Parks, Ron Olson, highlighting several concerns regarding boating access sites and inviting the Chief to participate in this meeting. Unfortunately, there was a conflict and he was unable to attend. We will schedule our Spring meeting to accommodate the Chief's attendance.
- One of the ongoing concerns is the lack of boat launches in the upper Detroit River. Amanda Treadwell from Parks came to our Fall 2018 meeting and talked about a feasibility study that was expected to be completed in fall 2018. Although the report still has not been released, Jim was provided a draft to review. The report concluded that Belle Isle is not an appropriate site for a new Boating Access Site, but there may be possibilities at Grayhaven State Harbor.
- Parks did offer slips at Milliken Marina this past spring, based on concerns raised by this committee. They opened the marina early and were willing to rent slips from April 1- 30, but there were no slips rented. None of our members were aware of this opportunity but indicated there would be a lot of interest. It was likely announced too late last year as boaters already had arrangements by the time it was announced. But all agreed that \$200 for a slip was a bargain and would draw interest.
- Harley Ensign is scheduled for ramp improvements in 2020. An online survey was available and was looking for input on two options, 1) close site entirely for 10 weeks (cost \$900,000), or 2) do in two phases so some ramps were open during construction. This second option would take 14 weeks and cost \$1.1M. The preliminary results from the survey indicated that people preferred a complete closure, as early in the season as possible.
  - John B indicated that October to ice is the slowest and would be the preferred timeframe. If the work was done earlier in the year, he indicated it would be catastrophic for his business.

- Another suggestion was to complete the project all at once and use the \$200,000 savings to put towards a fish cleaning station. Some of the local clubs could help with maintenance, if needed.
- ACTION: The committee will send a letter stating the proposed alternative should be doing the construction all as once, but during the late season – to minimize impacts on anglers.
- Clinton River Cut-off BAS – A feasibility study was conducted to look at using the Admiral Marina as an alternative launch location.
- Ice access at Selfridge – Bob Neely sent photos of a simple stair solution that is being used on Lake Erie. Some still preferred looking into a ramp option off the front of the site, but it is unlikely there would be support from Parks Division.

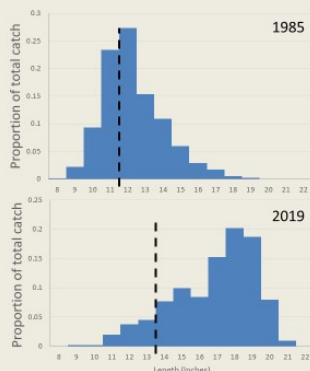
### **Consent Decree Negotiations (Patrick Hanchin, MDNR-Fisheries)**

- The allocation from the last decree was that the tribes got most of the whitefish, and the State got the rest, including salmon. The lake trout were split about 50:50 but varies regionally.
- The State has been preparing for several years, including getting input from Biologist's and angling groups.
- The "table setting" meeting will be taking place at the end of September. This includes things like selecting meeting dates, agreeing on cost sharing, and agreeing on a moderator.
- Once negotiations begin, all parties will be held to a non-disclosure agreement. So there will be no updates on specifics, as the parties are not able to discuss.
- DNR is the lead agency for negotiations, but the Governor's office has a tribal liaison who will be involved. The State is bringing back the retired lawyer from the Attorney General's office who was lead on the 2007 Inland Decree.
- Amici groups have been identified. They are classified as Friends of the Court but are not a party to the case. These include MUCC, Fish Producers Association, and Bay de Nod.
- The current Decree will likely expire during negotiations – the current agreement will still be in force until the new agreement is reached.
- There have been a lot of changes in the environment over the past 20 years.
  - The tribes may ask for more species this go around, as whitefish numbers are down.
  - The tribes may advocate to stock whitefish, drawing parallels to the successful lake trout rehabilitation program.
    - MSU study indicates it would not be feasible to stock whitefish
- The one lake trout limit for sport anglers on Traverse Bay is a tough one for anglers.

### **Fisheries Research Update (Todd Wills, MDNR-Fisheries)**

- Based on the St Clair River sturgeon set line survey, juvenile catch-per-effort (CPE) was down in 2019 relative to 2018 catches. The CPE for juveniles was down for the past three years, but adult CPE has been very stable for the past 5 years.
  - The recapture rate of tagged sturgeon has been increasing, meaning a greater proportion of the population is tagged. In 2019, 35% of the fish caught were previously tagged.
- Lake St Clair trap net survey
  - Smallmouth Bass
    - The CPE from the smallmouth bass showed an increasing trend over the past several years, and 2019 was just below average.
    - The size of bass comparing 1985 (12-inch MSL) to 2019 (14-inch MSL) – much bigger fish in 2019
    - Healthy population with lots of larger, older individuals
    - No change in SMB mortality in 2002-2019 time series.

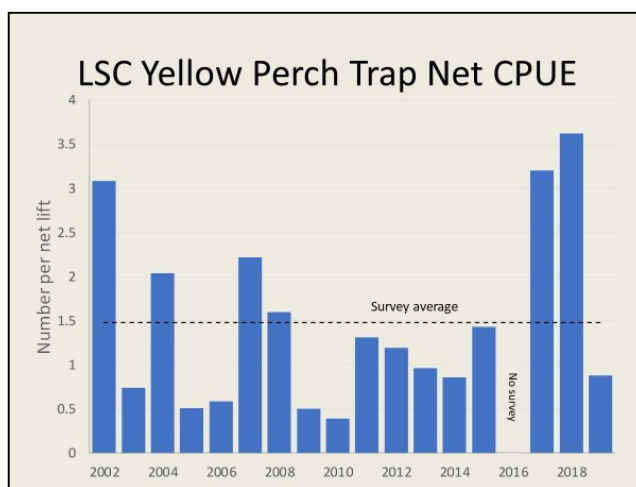
## LSC Smallmouth Bass Size Structure



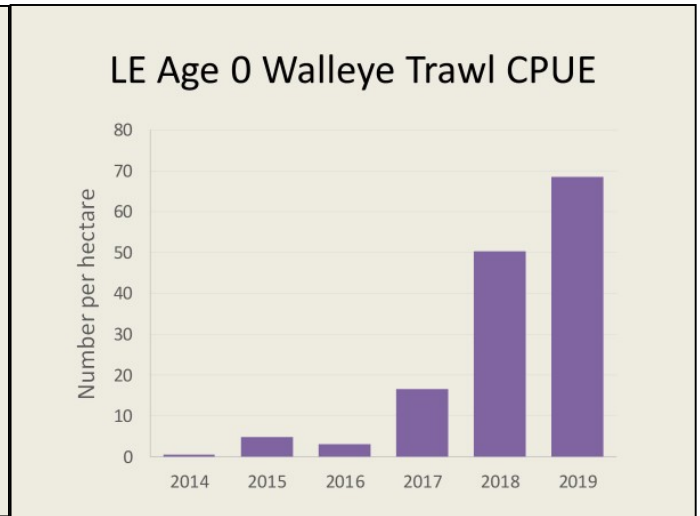
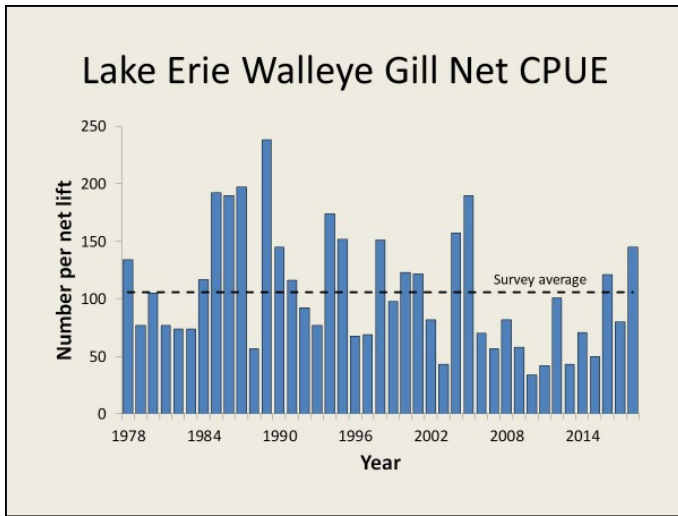
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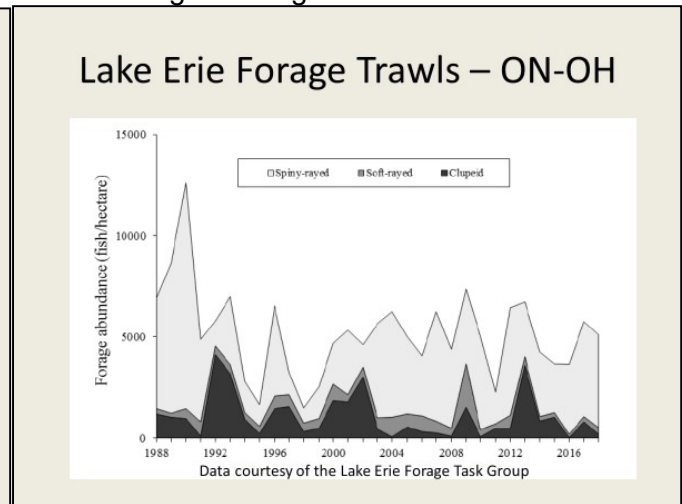
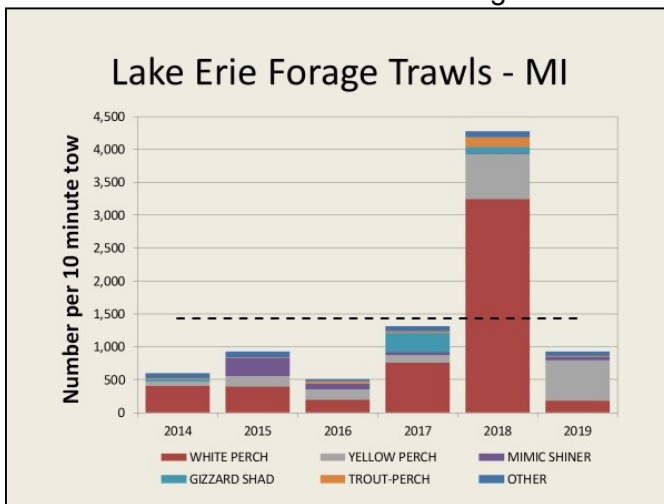
- Yellow Perch
  - Big drop in CPE from 2018 to 2019; below long-term average.
  - Lake St Clair perch are starting out really small compared to Lake Erie – age-2 almost 4 inches smaller



- Walleye
  - CPE above average
- Channel Catfish
  - Largest CPE ever; had 900 pounds in just one net
  - Although there is a consumption advisory – this is an underutilized species for catch and release opportunities
- MI and Ontario will be partnering on a small fish assessment next summer to get a lakewide picture on Lake St Clair
- Lake Erie walleye gill net CPE is was above average in 2018
- The Lake Erie age-0 walleye trawl CPE was highest in our survey in 2018, as well as all other jurisdictions. The MI CPE was even higher in 2019.



- With multiple years of strong year class production, a common question is – are there too many walleye (or not enough forage)?
  - All age-classes of walleye in the 2018 gill net survey had growth rates greater than the statewide average.
    - The 2015 year class (age-3) was very large and there was no decline in growth
    - Growth of walleye has been remarkably consistent through time – all the way back to the 70s
  - Forage does not vary much over time, but 2018 was out of the ordinary and very high.
    - Lakewide data give no indication of a forage shortage



- Walleye diets in summer are mostly gizzard shad and white perch, with about 10% yellow perch. In fall gill nets, diet is mostly gizzard shad and white perch, with less than 1% yellow perch.
- Lake Erie yellow perch trawling found good CPEs in 2018 and 2019.
- Lake Erie age-0 walleye appeared skinnier this year – but may have been behind schedule due to a late hatch because of the cold spring.
- Joel said he saw a lot of floating SMB on Lake St Clair this year beginning in June. If photos are available send them to DNR. Likely not attributable to VHS because water temperatures would be too warm.
- Joel feels the number of muskies where they typically see them are considerably lower.
- Reports of more tiger muskies being caught.

### **Law Enforcement Update (Cpl. Pat Hartsig and Cpl. Nick Atkins, MDNR-Law Enforcement)**

- Both are with the Great Lakes Enforcement Unit
- There are 9 CO Specialists now, Nick and Pat cover the east side (Huron and Erie)
  - Commercial, tribal, wholesale markets, bait, etc
- They have side scan sonar – was used to recover 2,000 feet of abandoned gill nets.
- 2018 report highlights
- There is case law regarding possession limits from an incident last year in Port Huron. The defendant was checked with a limit of walleye in the morning and a limit of walleye later that evening. He claimed one of the limits was caught in Ontario. The judge ruled you can pick one – can't get both a MI and Ontario limit in one day.

### **Lunch—provided by DNR**

### **New Yellow Perch Study (Andrew Briggs, MDNR-Fisheries)**

- Age-2 and age-3 walleye in Lake St Clair grow much slower than perch in Lake Erie or Saginaw Bay.
- There was a yellow perch diet study done on Lake St Clair in 1996 which will be used for reference.
- Both zooplankton and benthos (bottom sediments) will be evaluated
- Field sampling was completed in 2019 and data will be transferred to CMU for analysis.
- Ralph says that big perch are moving in during the fall – he thinks they are transient
- Joel mentioned that some big perch just started being caught in the Mile Roads area, but numbers are still low

### **Detroit River Habitat Projects (Bob Burns, Friends of the Detroit River)**

- Summarized specific habitat projects that were being done to address Beneficial Use Impairments as part of the Detroit River, Area of Concern.
- The Detroit River plan identified 14 specific habitat projects.
- Several projects were completed on Belle Isle, including connecting Blue Heron Lagoon to the Detroit River, creating a connecting channel from Blue Heron to Lake Okonoka, and connecting Lake Okonoka to the Detroit River through a culvert. In Lake Okonoka, a series of deep channels were cut to add varied depth in this shallow lake and basking logs and woody material were added to enhance habitat.
- Another project was completed on Belle Isle along the South Fishing Pier. Habitat improvements included digging some deep pools and adding wave breakers to promote vegetation.
- Work on Sugar Island includes adding shoals along the southern end, creating deeper pools, and adding habitat structures.
- Stony and Celeron Islands had shoals constructed to protect shallow water and wetland habitat. These projects were designed to not just benefit fish, but also mudpuppies, turtles, and snakes.

### **Fisheries Division Updates (Jim Francis, MDNR-Fisheries)**

- The walleye bag limit regulation for the St Clair-Detroit River System that was discussed at the past couple of meeting will be going to the NRC “For Information” at their September meeting.
  - Ralph still prefers the Saginaw Bay regulation (8 walleye bag with 13 inch min size limit) for our waters
  - Rick pointed out that the Saginaw Bay system is very different – “Eat a walleye and save a perch” – managing for balance in the system.
- The plan is to propose a consistent size limit (15 inches) in the St Clair- Detroit River System, to take effect in 2021.

- Legislative update
  - A bill to increase sturgeon poaching fines passed the House and was referred to the Senate
  - Congresswoman Dingell was the co-sponsor on the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA) bill to add funding to states to implement their Wildlife Action Plans.
  - There are several competing bills related to updating regulation on the commercial fishery.
    - DNR supports HB 4567, 4568, and 4569, which establishes a flat fee for fishing and wholesaling, updates fines and penalties, establishes restitution, defines list of commercial species, and prohibits commercial harvest of game fishes.
    - Other bills include HB 4790 and SB 389 – DNR is still reviewing these bills.
- Muskie and walleye were added to the tournament registration system this year.
  - 8 muskie tournaments were registered this year – 7 were on Lake St Clair
- Mandatory reporting (in place of kill tag) for harvested muskies began last year. During 2018-19, 28 fish were registered – 16 through the ice and 12 in open water
- Some raised concerns about the timing and locations of bass tournaments, in response to perceived mishandling of fish and mortality associated with tournaments.
  - During an extended hot period this past summer, Tom Goniea sent a letter to all tournament directors urging caution during the period of high water temperatures. This resulted in several directors cancelling tournaments because of the expected increase in mortality.
  - DNR is getting good information because tournaments are required to report results
  - Some proposed developing regulations for successful release or implementing penalties and fines

#### **Committee Member Round Table (All)**

- Tim Muir – has been helping MUCC with some of the commercial fishing issues.
- Jim Felgenauer – There were good catches at this year's Sturgeon Classic. There were 30 registered boats and they landed over 100 sturgeon.
- Mary Bohling – Sea Grant looking for a partner for their spring fisheries workshop. Congresswoman Dingell is holding an Environmental Town Hall meeting on October 7 at the Wyandotte Boat Club.
- Ralph Kandt – Although anglers have not been catching 25 perch on Lake St Clair, it will likely be an issue if there are good catches this winter.
- Joel Piatek – He has access to donations through his sponsors, that can be used to promote fishing outings and activities. If organizations have requests, please let him know as early as possible.

#### **Summary of meeting, future meeting topics and locations (Jerry Comfort and Tim Muir)**

- Jim will work with Parks Division to find a date for our spring meeting that will accommodate Chief Olson's participation.

Lake Erie / Lake St. Clair Citizens  
Fishery Advisory Committee

Belle Isle Nature Zoo  
September 24, 2019

Attendees:

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Name	Affiliation
<b>Advisors:</b>	
John Bacarella	Sportsmen's Direct Inc
Mary Bohling	Michigan Sea Grant
Dan Boileau	Downriver Walleye Federation
Paul Bolling	Charter Captain
Bob Burns	Friends of the Detroit River/Detroit Riverkeeper
Stan Bydlos	Perch Point Conservation Club
Jerry Comfort, Co-Chair	Lake St Clair Walleye Association
Mark Davis	Metro-West Steelheaders
Eric Diesing	Clinton River Watershed Council
Mike Eichbrecht	Charter Captain/Michigan Sportsman.com
Jim Felgenauer	St. Clair-Detroit River Sturgeon for Tomorrow
Jim Francis	MDNR-Fisheries
John Giszczak	Michigan Charter Boat Association
Ralph Kandt	Wholesale Bait Dealers
Dan Kimmel	Michigan B.A.S.S. Nation
Rick Kretzschmar	National Professional Anglers Association
Ted Meyers	Shore Fisherman
Tim Muir, Co-Chair	Lake St. Clair Walleye Association/MUCC
Joel Piatek	Michigan Ontario Muskie Club
Henry Walters	Michigan Charter Boat Association
Bruce Yinger	Downriver Bass Association
<b>Staff:</b>	
Nick Atkin	MDNR-Law Enforcement
Andrew Briggs	MDNR-Fisheries
Patrick Hanchin, phone	MDNR-Fisheries
Pat Hartsig	MDNR-Law Enforcement
Sara Thomas	MDNR-Fisheries
Todd Wills	MDNR-Fisheries
<b>Guests:</b>	
Bob Chatzke	Associate of Ralph Kandt
Marc Verge	Downriver Bass Association

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