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FISHING

Lake Erie anglers address gobies

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Round gobies, a rude, invasive species that entered Lake Erie waters more than a decade ago, got the most mention during fisheries presentations at the 18th annual State of Lake Erie Meeting held Thursday evening at the Southtowns Walleye Association clubhouse in Hamburg.

Love them or hate them, gobies— a bottom-hugging, small, grayish creature most anglers consider an ugly annoyance—have taken over as a main forage source for popular game fish. Presenters discussing smallmouth bass, walleye, steelhead trout and lake trout all credited these critters with providing a food source that improved numbers and sizes in these popular game fishes.

Fish community trends

Don Einhouse, Department of Environmental Conservation Lake Erie Unit Leader, noted that of the five lakes in the Great Lakes chain, Lake Erie's shoreline is the least forested and has the most cropland coverage of all inland lakes. Erie, because of its relatively shallow waters, supports more fish biomass than the other four Great Lakes combined.

Cropland and residential areas also contribute to more phosphorous runoff than other lakes. Excessive runoff, mainly at the western end of the lake, results in those infamous "dead zones" so often reported in the Central Basin during the summer season. To date, none of these zones have shown in New York State waters.

Erie offers with a mix of cold-water and warm-water species tolerant areas known as mesotrophic or somewhere in the middle. With a good phosphorous balance, Lake Erie has as its major shallow-waters predator the walleye and lake trout is its principal deep-water game fish.

Einhouse pointed out lower numbers of successful year classes for walleye and perch in the Western Basin; Eastern Basin year classes, however, have shown high spring spawning numbers for both species in five of the past seven years. As a result, the Barcelona to Buffalo-based Eastern Basin has produced a greater fish biomass than the shallower Western Basin since 2007.

He credits round gobies for the increased sizes of smallmouth bass, with a scarcity of older (more than 10 years in age) bass. Lake trout show similar patterns—greater numbers but fewer older fish. One possible cause for lake trout loss could be predation by sea lamprey.

Entertainment Calendar

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Fri 4/20: Red Green's Wit & Wisdom Tour

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Lamprey dismay

Mike Steeves, with the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, discussed sea lamprey dynamics. Steeves said the problem in controlling these blood and fluids-sucking fish predators is that their life cycle allows them to elude traps and chemical treatment.

"Sea lamprey young born in streams can bore into substrata [mud] and often remain there for three to four years and as long as 17 years before emerging to head out to a lake and begin a two-year life cycle of fish predation," he said.

The first major control effort done across Lake Erie with lampricide in 1986 removed about 90 percent of emerging sea lampreys. However, Steeves noted that a rebound at the turn of the century restored their numbers.

Steeves suggest a double treatment of lampricide done lakewide in sequential years might curb 95 percent the first year and 95 percent of the remaining 5 percent during the second treatment.

He concluded that while lake trout are the principal target of this predator, he has seen their marks on virtually every larger fish species swimming in Lake Erie.

Keystone steelie catches

Chuck Murray, Pennsylvania Lake Erie Unit Leader, has seen lamprey marks on steelhead, but notes that they elude attacks more efficiently than other fish that forage closer to lake bottoms.

Murray cited rainbow/steelhead trout as the main fish stocked in Pennsylvania waters. He recalled the last stocking of king (Chinook) salmon was in 1997 and the final coho salmon stocking took place in 2003.

Now, steelhead trout are the central figure in stocking; Pennsylvania fisheries personnel gather feral brood stock for rearing and releasing in its state's streams.

He has seen declining numbers of steelies since 2005, the result of predation of young stocks, lamprey wounding, and possibly other causes. Catch-and-release practices have increased in recent years. Elk and Walnut creeks are the major producers of steelhead fishing. Twenty Mile Creek near the New York State line ranks a close third in steelie presence. Anglers have to purchase a trout stamp along with a license to fish for trout in Pennsylvania's Lake Erie waters.

Dispensing with drugs

Helen Domske, with NY Sea Grant and host of the meeting, discussed concerns fishery researchers have raised about increased presence of pharmaceuticals flowing into fishery waters.

All, not just anglers and boater, can help in reducing drug influxes by not flushing expired and unwanted drugs down drains. Dispensing drugs into garbage containers might help reduce drug presence in waterways, but a better option would be to go through the medicine cabinet/ chest/storage area and place unwanted and unused prescription drugs [except controlled drugs] in a sealed mailer bag.

A National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day will be April 28 from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Police agencies will offer free mailer bags at hospital, fire hall, and town facilities around the region. To locate the nearest site, go to deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback and click on "Collection Site Locator."

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