

Black Lake Sturgeon Information Piece

History of Lake Sturgeon in Cheboygan Watershed

Lakes within the Cheboygan watershed have a long history of supporting a sturgeon fishery, especially Black Lake. Historically this fishery has been a winter spear fishery, often with a festival, the Black Lake Shiverree, associated with the sturgeon season.

When harvest began to decline, and Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Fisheries Division biologists documented a serious decline in the Black Lake sturgeon population in 1997; all parties interested in this special fish sprang into action. A Sturgeon For Tomorrow Chapter formed to help preserve sturgeon and the sturgeon fishery, and led efforts to protect vulnerable sturgeon during the spawning run by initiating a sturgeon guarding program. Additionally, in 2000 the DNR placed very restrictive harvest regulations on Black Lake to protect the lake sturgeon population while enabling this historic fishery to continue.

Limited Entry Fishery

From 2000 to 2009 the fishery was very tightly regulated by a limited entry fishery. During this period, managers in consultation and with the cooperation of sturgeon enthusiasts became more confident that more participation in the fishery could be effectively managed. Increased participation in the limited entry fishery was allowed, and harvest was adequately controlled. The population of sturgeon began to grow.

It was believed that an unlimited entry fishery could be employed on Black Lake, with harvest controlled through time so the population could continue to grow. Response to the unlimited entry season in 2010 was overwhelmingly positive, with anglers very happy to have the opportunity to participate. During the 2011 Black Lake sturgeon harvest season, however, state anglers harvested 11 sturgeon, exceeding the state's allocation by four fish. The following year there was a state quota of seven fish, but a voluntary quota for state anglers was enacted and only two fish were harvested.

Sustaining Lake Sturgeon Harvests

Realizing the inherent difficulties in managing an unlimited entry fishery, the DNR will continue employing several safeguards to ensure sturgeon harvest remains sustainable. Together with increasing on-ice personnel to oversee season administration and improving communication regarding notification of the ending of the harvest season, the DNR has implemented a harvest regulation model which will allow for maintaining the unlimited entry fishery. This model will manage the harvest in a way that will ensure long-term harvest numbers remain at or below allowable levels. This model may result in variable harvest numbers over the years relative to the state's allocation, but will ensure long-term sturgeon harvest will be within target levels.

Lake Sturgeon Regulation

The regulation of sturgeon harvest is part of a coordinated effort with Native American Tribes in the 1836 Treaty area, Sturgeon For Tomorrow, and the DNR to rehabilitate the sturgeon population in Black Lake. Rehabilitation of lake sturgeon in the Cheboygan River watershed is a cooperative effort involving the DNR, the Black Lake Chapter of Sturgeon For Tomorrow, Michigan State University and Tower-Kleber Limited Partnership. Efforts also include sturgeon research, stocking, habitat protection and improvement, and protection of spawning adults. With all these efforts, the outlook for the sturgeon population is indeed bright.