



## Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee

Established by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to improve and maintain fishery resources of Lake Huron through better communication and partnership.

### **Approved Minutes Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee (LHCFAC) RAM Center, Roscommon, MI Wednesday, April 11, 2012**

**Attendees:** Jim Baker, Ed Barr, Dave Borgeson, Pete Butchko, Jim DeClerck, Dave Fielder, Todd Grischke, Tom Hamilton, Ji He, Lindsey Henski, Jim Johnson, Frank Krist, Bill Leichtman, Steve Lepeak, Shirley Martin, Ken Merckel, Craig Milkowski, Doug Niergarth, Jack Noble, Judy Ogden, William Olar, Ken Pletcher, Nick Popoff, Ron Ramsey, Bob Reider, Ed Retherford, Jeff Schaeffer, Brandon Schroeder, Dana Serafin, Rick Kretzschmar, Jerry Serafin, Julie Shafto, Steve Shafto, Fred Sterns, Paul Wendler, Gary Whelan, Dennis White, Forrest Williams

Frank Krist called the meeting to order. Attendees introduced themselves.

The minutes from the January 11, 2012 meeting were acknowledged and approved as is.

#### **General Update – Frank Krist:**

For the *Tuesday June 19, 2012 Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee meeting*, Atlantic salmon and cisco plus one or two additional items will be on the agenda. This should allow plenty of time for committee discussions. *The Lake Michigan Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee* just had their meeting. They are struggling with Chinook salmon stocking decisions since the forage base in Lake Michigan is now similar to the forage base in Lake Huron when the alewife crashed. The Lake Michigan Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee voted to recommend no salmon plants in Lake Michigan for the next two years followed by a reevaluation. The Director, Rodney Stokes was present to witness the debate and he noted that even though it was a very challenging issue there was an excellent exchange of information that was discussed in a professional manner. The Director indicated his support for the Citizen Advisory Committees.

#### **2011 Creel Summary – Jim Johnson / Ed Barr MDNR:**

The report, *A summary of creel survey harvest estimates, Lake Huron 2011* was distributed. There has been a trend of relative stability for the trout and salmon fisheries for the last 6 years with some high points. Note on page 7 of the attached report, steelhead catch rates broke an all time record. Also on page 9, the walleye fishery in the main basin has increased 7 fold since the alewife crashed and are providing fish to all areas of Lake Huron during the summer months.

In 2011, Alpena ran a day/night creel comparison. The evening creel ran from 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. to evaluate walleye anglers for 3 months. During the four-hour night creel, three times as many walleye were caught as compared to an eight-hour day shift. **The complete report is attached\***.

### **The Natives Strike Back – Jim Johnson:**

Lake Michigan has trillions of zebra mussels and quagga mussels. Lake Huron has fewer mussels which leads to the question, ‘Why’? Native species such as lake whitefish, smallmouth bass, lake trout, walleye and lake sturgeon are thriving. Therefore, looking forward we need to ask, ‘Who’s eating the mussels’? In Lake Huron mussels appear to be a staple in the diets of round goby, freshwater drum, suckers, diving ducks and lake whitefish; with each whitefish eating as much as 6.3 pounds of larger mussels per year. Not only do round gobies eat the mussels, but also the native smallmouth bass, lake whitefish, walleye and lake trout eat the gobies. It is estimated that there are 100 million gobies in Lake Huron that eat around 20 trillion mussels each year.

### **Nearshore Fish Community Study – Jim Johnson:**

The nearshore areas appear to contain the most productive fisheries but the dilemma is that only the offshore waters have been monitored regularly. The mussels could be capturing the nutrients that drive productivity of the fisheries before the nutrients move to deeper water. Fortunately, in 2012 funding was provided for the:

#### **Nearshore Fish Community Study which will explore the following:**

- *Focus: Thunder Bay & Lexington and;*
- *Compare with Saginaw Bay and Les Cheneaux area;*
- *Describe the fish community;*
- *Describe the prey consumed;*
- *Distribution of fish by depth and substrate;*
- *Effect of substrate or bottom types on assessment catch;*
- *At Lexington compare with 1977 data*

The goal is to learn much about how the bottom substrate affects the fishery. Lake Huron has much more hard and rocky bottoms than Lake Michigan and harder surfaces provide more cover than sand and mud so Lake Huron could have more productive nearshore fisheries.

#### ***The water from shore to about 60 feet will be sampled intensely including:***

- Beach seining:
- Electrofishing
  - Trap nets
  - Gill nets
  - Trawling
- Nearshore lower food web
  - Role of the newly introduced exotic “Bloody Red Shrimp” (Hemimysis)
  - Diets of round gobies
  - Diet analysis of predators

#### ***Several DNR and other agency researchers will participate including:***

- Alpena Fishery Research Station
  - Hiring a 6-month summer worker
- Lake St. Clair Fishery Research Station
  - Hiring a 2-yr technician to assist with field work and process all data
- Central Michigan University
  - Graduate student and student assistants
- Fish and Wildlife Service: Electrofishing boats for sampling smallmouth bass and gobies

In support of the Nearshore Study the *EPA's Coordinated Science & Monitoring Program* will participate by focusing on Lake Huron during 2012. The effort rotates to a different Great Lake each year with intense monitoring occurring on Lake Huron during 2002, 2007 and 2012. This year's effort will focus on the Thunder Bay watershed, nutrients, lower food web and the offshore fishery since the MDNR is focusing on the nearshore fishery.

***The other collaborators for the Coordinated Science & Monitoring Program include:***

- EPA: Providing funding, and conduct water quality work;
- DEQ: Watershed nutrient work, fund administration (Office of the Great Lakes);
- USGS: Watershed rivermouth nutrient flow, offshore prey fish assessments;
- NOAA: Bathymetry and benthic invertebrate monitoring
- Environment Canada: nutrients and benthos
- University of Michigan: Substrate mapping, water quality

An example of a potential outcome is to learn more about smallmouth bass which may be the fish of the future in the near shore fishery. They are present in the north from the Les Cheneaux Islands to the south in Saginaw Bay. Smallmouth bass are a perfect predator on rusty crawfish and round gobies. They can spawn efficiently since the males guard the nests. They also contend with long warm summers better than other species. **A discussion of the Nearshore Study is attached\*.**

**The Expanding Walleye Fishery with highlights from Thunder Bay – Dave Fielder, MDNR:**

In 2003, walleye populations boomed with numbers peaking in 2007 at over 12 million fish. Numbers have come back down a bit, but appear stable and still remain at high levels. Fishery biologists have been jaw tagging walleye for many years, with the returns helping to track movement. A new study specifically designed to track walleye movement via an implanted transmitter placed in adult walleyes has begun. During April 2011, 200 walleye were implanted from the Tittabawasee River and another 200 walleyes from the Maumee River. The batteries have a 3 year life span so much information should be obtained from the transmitters. To determine the direction and distance that the walleye are traveling a large number of receivers were located from the Maumee River to Bois Blanc Island along the shoreline.

Early evidence is showing that a large percentage of the walleyes in Saginaw Bay move out of the Bay by June 1. The fish have been recorded at that time as far north as the Straits of Mackinac with some fish moving toward Southern Lake Huron. It appears that a significant number of walleyes that contribute to the excellent fishery in Thunder Bay travel from Saginaw Bay during early summer. Before the study is completed there should be a good understanding of the extent that the Saginaw walleye population contributes to the fisheries throughout Lake Huron.

**Atlantic Salmon Experimental Rearing Study Progress and Overview – Dave Borgeson, MDNR:**

***Overview of the Study:***

Atlantic salmon have traditionally been reared at Lake Superior State University (LSSU) and released in the St. Mary's River. With Atlantic salmon showing up throughout Lake Huron and considering the low number stocked, the numbers showing up were staggering. The Atlantic salmon have adapted well to the ecosystem changes and appear to offer much potential to improve the Lake Huron fishery. After extensive discussion, it was decided that an experimental rearing study would be established to determine if the fish could be raised at production level in the Platte River State Hatchery. Difficulties were encountered early when an attempt was made to raise eggs to the yearling stage and whirling disease was detected in the very young fish. It was determined that whirling disease could be bypassed if Atlantic salmon were reared starting with

fall fingerling transferred from other hatcheries. To address whirling disease a UV water treatment system was installed in the fall of 2011 on the Brundage Creek water supply to disinfect the water. Dredging of Spring Pond is scheduled for this August which should provide additional safeguards against the disease. To test the UV upgrade, eggs obtained last fall were moved to the Platte River Hatchery and currently 116,000 fingerlings show no sign of whirling disease, however, the disease usually manifests later in the rearing cycle so it is too early to determine if the changes were successful. The completion of this stage will determine if full production from egg to yearling size can be successful at this hatchery.

Other Atlantic salmon rearing capabilities at the Platte River Hatchery need to be determined including documenting the full production capacity of the small outdoor raceways, finding the capacity of the large indoor raceways and determining the possible upper limit of the Atlantic salmon production for the facility. Finally, an evaluation will be conducted to determine if the production affects the effluent discharges which must comply with established standards.

***The Status of the Atlantic Salmon Rearing Study:***

St. Marys River fish continue to be used as the brood stock. About 80,000 yearlings have been reared in the Platte River Hatcher and are surviving well and are scheduled to be stocked in the St. Marys River during May at approximately 6 inches in length as yearlings.

***Future phase production:***

Work will continue to determine the capability of the Platte River Hatchery to rear Atlantic salmon on a full production scale in 2013-2014 providing up to 120,000 Atlantic salmon with production reaching 120,000-160,000 yearlings in 2015-2016.

***Entering Phase II of the project to determine potential new locations for stocking Atlantic salmon:***

There will be a discussion at the Tuesday June 19, 2012 Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee meeting reviewing information about potential stocking locations for Atlantic salmon.

**An overview of the Atlantic salmon experimental rearing study is attached\*.**

**Status of the Prey Fish in Lake Huron and Related Research Projects – Jeff Schaeffer, US Geological Survey Great Lakes Science Center:**

***Prey Fish Status:***

The 2011 bottom trawl survey of the forage species had a slight uptick, largely due to increases in bloater. The acoustic survey also showed a slight increase in bloater and an increase emerald shiner numbers. There was a strong hatch of smelt during 2011 but the adult smelt density remains low. The system is starting to look very stable with not much change from year to year.

***Another project that is ongoing is the ‘Rivermouths and the Great Lakes, Freshwater Estuaries in Freshwater Seas’:***

This study is investigating the function that rivermouths provide to the ecology of both streams and adjacent lakes. One full year of data is now complete. The importance of rivermouths is not well known, however, these areas are important because they are where people interact, commercial shipping and recreational boating take place and fishery and wildlife resources thrive. Rivermouths are often major nurseries for larval fish. We began studying rivermouths extensively in 2011. Rivermouths provide a mixing zone of lake water and river water and one amazing fact is that rivers often flow backward with lake water present far upstream! In 2012, the Rivermouth Survey will be moving to Lake Huron to extensively study the Thunder Bay River!

## **Cormorant Management in Thunder Bay and Saginaw Bay – Dave Fielder, MDNR:**

Thunder Bay has been at near goal levels for a few years, however, reproduction of whitefish has not recovered. Since the cormorants have stabilized at much lower levels there have been no complaints from Grand and Long Lakes about cormorant management problems.

Cormorants in Saginaw Bay largely originate from nesting birds on the Little Charity Island and Spoils Island at the mouth of the river. The population on Little Charity is still increasing while the bird density on Spoils Island remains stable. There are a substantial number of nests and birds! Cormorants affect fish in two main ways, 1) by eating the species (predation) and 2) by eating the food of the species (competition).

Walleye diets contain high numbers of yellow perch. Therefore, the yellow perch population is decreasing for more reasons than just cormorants. Potential mortality of yellow perch is as high as the 80%. Rookery growth for cormorants in Saginaw Bay is not yet at carrying capacity. No direct connection has been established yet between fish populations in Saginaw Bay and cormorants.

A discussion followed that focused on determining if work could be started in the Bay to show the potential impacts cormorants might be having on yellow perch, walleye and other fish populations. Todd Grischke, Lake Huron Basin Coordinator and Peter Butchko, US Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services Director agreed to coordinate on a plan that may begin preliminary work during 2013. The lack of funding and personnel is the largest challenge that may slow the work.

## **Volunteers Perspective: Citizen Cormorant Control Group – Ed Retherford:**

Harassment on the Thunder Bay started eight years ago. The first goal was simply to keep the cormorants off of the fish plants. They began by making noise with household goods (pots and pans), and then progressing to pyro's (bangers or screamers). Harassment was finally expanded to lethal control. This is hard work, with mounds of required paperwork and reports. Without this effort the fisheries of Thunder Bay and the area lakes would be heavily impacted.

## **Direction for Restoring Cisco – Todd Grischke, MDNR:**

A summary of the Division's efforts and pilot cisco rearing study were discussed. Going forward the DNR is looking to partner with the Federal Government due to the amount of manpower needed, processing such a large number of eggs, and because our facilities are not capable of full production.

A Fisheries Brief Report, *Pilot Cisco Egg Take and Culture Study*, which is attached\* reviewed the many objectives of the study that have been achieved and the remaining questions that need to be addressed which include:

- 1) Since live brood stock are essential, how can live-capture spawner collection methods such as trap netting and electrofishing be improved?
- 2) The existing egg source in the St. Mary's River is not sufficient so what other eggs sources should be explored which might include, Lower St. Marys River/Drummond Island, Georgian Bay/North Channel and Apostle Island offshore source?
- 3) Which egg source sites above are acceptable form a fish health or genetics perspective?
- 4) Can satisfactory fry survival be realized with a stable rearing temperature of approximately 7.5 degrees C or is a colder regime desirable?
- 5) What appropriate rearing densities are required for optimal production of ciscoes?

6) What is required to rear cisco at production numbers?

An expanded discussion will take place at the Tuesday June 19, 2012 Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee meeting to discuss these remaining questions.

### **Sea Grant Workshops – Brandon Schroeder, Michigan Sea Grant:**

Brandon distributed a draft agenda and promotional fliers. Committee members were encouraged to take multiple fliers for distribution. A large mailing, press releases, and website (social media) postings have all been done. Media releases will come out closer to the actual workshops. It was agreed that workshops will be held at three locations including Cedarville, Alpena and Port Huron. Workshops will be switched annually between Alpena - Oscoda and Port Huron - Ubyly.

### **Discussion of the 2012 MH-1 Lake Trout Harvest Regulations – Todd Grischke:**

The harvest model for 2012 is showing a greater number of lake trout available for harvest which will allow for more liberal size limits. Therefore, three options were presented to the committee for recommendation.

1. 27" max, no more than 1 greater than 32"
2. 22" minimum (same as MH-2)
3. 15" minimum (MH-3 thru MH-5)

Group discussion indicated that a minimum size of 15 or 22 inches would make no difference. Therefore, if 15" works out better scientifically, than the committee agrees to support it. The final decision on size limits will be presented at the June Natural Resources Commission Meeting and will be implemented immediately after approval of one of the options. There is an effort underway during the next two years to establish one lake trout size limit for all of the Michigan waters.

### **Fisheries Management and Law Enforcement Updates:**

*Todd Grischke, Lake Huron Basin Coordinator* – Congratulations to Ken Merckel! The new Michigan Salmon Steelheaders President.

Bill Moritz, former Wildlife Division Chief, was appointed DNR Deputy Director. The Fisheries Division Chief position has been posted as well.

Our budget situation is dire. We had to reduce the Fish Division budget by 2.2 million dollars this year, and we expect that there will be further reductions needed next fiscal year beginning October 1. This is a direct result of continued and increasing declines in license sales, both fishing and hunting.

Fisheries Division is undertaking a Strategic Planning Process and there will be 24 members, meeting from April through November. It is time to refocus and re-plan. Rodney Stokes, MDNR Director, created implementation teams that aligned with his four major priorities; recreation passport, customer service, increase participation in outdoor recreation, and fostering growth in the economy. Each implementation team will be submitting reports to the Director. Todd will look into forwarding the four team reports to the committee.

In an effort to be more transparent, the Division would like to post committee meeting minutes online. Member names would be posted, but no personal data including addresses and phone numbers will be shared except for the Chair and Basin Coordinator.

A Kids Fishing Issue Statement was distributed. The Division is looking at developing regulations/guidance specific to kids fishing. ***Please review the issue statement and provide input. The issue statement is attached\****.

Rockport Boating Access Site will close April 21 for maintenance. Port Austin and Grindstone harbors are also closed for a portion of this season.

***Craig Milkowski, Law Enforcement Division*** – Commercial Fishing Unit is down to four boats and four captains. Law Enforcement Division is also busy preparing for the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration in August in Bay City.

***Jim Baker, Southern Lake Huron Supervisor*** – This has been the earliest season ever to prep walleye ponds. Creel clerks also return this week. There are three days of training, and then they will begin at their assigned ports!

***Dave Borgeson, Northern Lake Huron Supervisor*** – The unit has been busy with regulation meetings regarding muskellunge, northern pike and brook trout. If interested parties cannot make the meetings, please comment online! Survey work continues on the Inland Waterway as well.

Meeting Adjourned.

**Next Meetings will be Tuesday June 19<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday October 16<sup>th</sup> at the Ram Center in Roscommon, MI.**

**\* The handouts may be obtained by emailing Frank Krist at [krist@speednetllc.com](mailto:krist@speednetllc.com)**