



# Fisheries Division Annual Report 2019

The mission of the DNR Fisheries Division is to protect and enhance fish environments, habitat populations and other forms of aquatic life and to promote the optimum use of these resources for the benefit of the people of Michigan.



[Michigan.gov/Fishing](https://Michigan.gov/Fishing)



Michigan is home to exceptional freshwater fishing with opportunities from metro Detroit all the way to the western Upper Peninsula. With great opportunity comes great responsibility, and caring for our aquatic habitats and fisheries is something the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Division takes to heart.



In the DNR Fisheries Division's 2019 annual report, we share snapshots of the critical work our employees do every day. That work aligns with our 2018–2022 strategic plan, "Charting the Course: Fisheries Division's Framework for Managing Aquatic Resources," which guides how we manage and support the state's world-class fisheries.



## Develop strategically focused assessment and decision support tools

### 50 years of surveying Les Cheneaux Islands fish community

2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the DNR's annual fish community netting survey in the Les Cheneaux Islands region of northern Lake Huron. Conducted every year since 1969, those efforts have developed a half-century's worth of information, one of the longest, uninterrupted databases in Michigan. The survey has used the same gear specifications, timing and sampling locations to maintain comparability over the years. Providing researchers with a cross-section of the fish community, the data gained national attention as one of the best-documented cases of cormorant/fish impacts in the Great Lakes. The study is funded by grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Sport Fish Restoration Program and the DNR.

### Innovations in the Statewide Angler Survey Program

Last year the Statewide Angler Survey Program explored several new technologies and survey designs to reduce costs and increase the precision of estimating Great Lakes fish harvest and angler effort. "Bus route" survey designs, common in other states but never used in Michigan, were introduced in the Les Cheneaux Islands to decrease the time spent driving and increase the amount of time spent with anglers. Staff set up game cameras along ports in Lake Michigan to capture early-morning fishing activity before clerks arrive at work. Additionally, satellite technologies (rather than the traditional method, airplanes) were tested for counting boats on the water. Program staff will evaluate these new tools and determine where best to deploy them if they prove successful.





## Foster efficient division operations

### Streamlining fisheries grant application processes

Applying for a grant takes time and preparation, and Fisheries Division staff wanted to do more to give prospective applicants the information they need and a clearer path toward the best funding match. The division, in response to suggestions from past applicants, combined three former habitat conservation grant programs (Aquatic Habitat, Dam Management and Habitat Improvement Account) into the Fisheries Habitat Grant program. The new grant makes it easier to apply for multiple funding sources with one proposal and enables more effective review and funding decisions. One of the new grant's key components is the division's Priority Habitat Conservation Projects List, which helps applicants target projects that address important issues. In 2019, 12 applications addressed priority items, including sustaining healthy habitats, fisheries and aquatic communities.



### Working together to collect fall salmon eggs

Three weirs, dozens of fisheries employees from across the state and months of planning to achieve one goal: collect millions of fertilized salmon eggs during the fall salmon run – first for Michigan's use and then to support fish production goals in Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin. Planning for these egg takes began the previous year to ensure all weirs and egg-collection facilities would be fully staffed and ready to move when the fish were ready. The eggs will develop into fingerlings for spring 2020 stocking and yearlings for more stocking in spring 2021, when fisheries staff again comes together – it's an "all hands on deck" effort – to complete the annual, monumental and rewarding task of stocking millions of salmon at the end of their rearing cycles.

# Ensure healthy aquatic ecosystems and sustainable fisheries

## Restoring the Saginaw Bay reef

This past year brought the long-awaited completion of the Coreyon Reef Restoration Project in Saginaw Bay, about 11 miles northeast of the mouth of the Saginaw River. Aimed at restoring offshore spawning habitat for several fish species, the project – funded principally by a \$980,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – saw more than 22,500 tons of rock carefully placed to create a 2-acre reef, which rises 5 feet off the bottom of the bay in about 18 feet of water. The Fisheries Division partnered with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy to lead the effort, which is critical to supporting resilient and diverse fish populations like lake whitefish, lake trout and walleye.



## Major renovation of the Little Manistee River weir

The Little Manistee River Weir is located just east of Manistee and has been in operation for more than 50 years. Built in 1967, the weir is the primary collection site for Chinook salmon and the sole egg source for steelhead production. In 2017, capital outlay funding was approved for renovations critical to keeping the facility operational into the future. Improvements included new concrete holding ponds; installation of mechanical fish crowders, outdoor lighting and fencing; and an upgraded backup generator system, water pumps and electrical components – all of which comfortably handled the fall 2019 collection of salmon eggs. The enhancements have not only added many more years of service for the weir, but also worked in important cost-saving efficiencies.

## Promote effective communication, outreach and education



### Instant text messages for sturgeon season

Technology continues to merge with our outdoor experiences, and that trend was front and center during the annual lake sturgeon season on Black Lake in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula. It's a flurry of activity as hundreds anglers vie for the chance to harvest one of these iconic fish. The season may last for a few hours, or up to five days, so the DNR works hard to connect with people spread out across the 10,000-acre lake to make sure they are informed of the season's closure so an overharvest does not occur. For the 2019 season, the department decided to leverage the speed and simplicity of text messaging to quickly and efficiently communicate with anglers registered for the Black Lake sturgeon season. When registering for the season, people provided their cell phone numbers if they wished to receive text updates on the season's progression. They received instant texts when the season opened, as each fish was harvested and when the season closes. On-ice angler response to the new communication method was positive, and expects to continue it in coming seasons.

## 42,000 conversations with anglers

How long was your trip? What species were you targeting? How many and what kind of fish did you catch? If you're out fishing the Great Lakes or inland waters, you may cross paths with DNR employees asking those very questions. In some cases, they may ask to measure or weigh fish and to take scales or other bony part samples for aging. These DNR representatives are called creel clerks, and they conduct these quick surveys to collect valuable information that helps the department make decisions about managing Michigan's fisheries. This past year, creel clerks spoke with more than 42,000 anglers across the state. In addition to collecting survey data, clerks also spend a good deal of time talking with people about fishing regulations and fish-stocking efforts and provide angler feedback to the Fisheries Division to improve outreach efforts and informational materials. The conversation often is about more than where the best fishing is or tips on catching a certain species; DNR creel clerks also answer questions about state parks, boat launches, hunting and many other natural resources topics.

## Improve and build stronger strategic partnerships



### Working together to support muskellunge

For nearly 20 years, the Michigan Musky Alliance (MMA) has been an active partner in managing Michigan's muskellunge fishing opportunities. The group regularly provides financial support and also participates on the warmwater and coolwater resources steering committees that recommend regulations for stronger Michigan fisheries. The alliance recently purchased 15 acoustic transmitters, a value of \$4,500, for the Lake St. Clair/Detroit River muskellunge tracking study. Information collected from this study will help protect and manage arguably the greatest muskellunge fishery in the world. MMA also works closely with Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery each year, providing funding to buy food for young muskellunge that are stocked statewide. Partnerships like these are yielding real benefits that aid the DNR's management efforts and the anglers who enjoy the resulting fishing opportunities.



### Stocking walleye in Bays de Noc

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and the Bay de Noc Great Lakes Sports Fishermen joined the Fisheries Division last year in collaborative stocking that gave the Bays de Noc a much-needed boost. DNR crews conducted a spring walleye egg take in northern Little Bay de Noc. Eggs were transferred to the Thompson State Fish Hatchery, and a portion of those eggs were moved to the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe hatchery. After hatching, larval walleye were raised to spring fingerling size, harvested and stocked in the Bays de Noc – a total of 460,000 fish. Efforts like these that pool state, tribal and public resources to rear and stock walleye are a proven, valuable component of fisheries management.