

DO WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION TO SUSTAIN OUR FISHERY?

We probably all have heard our grandfathers and fathers lament that “the fishing in Rock Lake just isn’t what it used to be when I was younger!” They would go on to regale us with tales of how you could catch your limit of walleyes in a hour, or bag your limit of bluegills the size of platters in a morning or the 45 inch Northern Pike caught off the dock one evening.

Well, although there may be some exaggeration, they may be right.

Approximately every five years the Wisconsin DNR conducts a comprehensive fish survey in Rock Lake. These surveys are compared against each other and compared to statewide and South Central regional data. Management recommendations are then made as to any necessity to stock a certain species or impose reduced bag limits or impose slot limits. The last Rock Lake survey was done in 2014. While they findings are not conclusive there is some evidence that our fishery may require us to take some action for some species.

The next comprehensive fish survey on Rock Lake will be in 2020 with the final report due in the spring of 2021.

Here is a brief narrative by species on the findings as taken from the “Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Comprehensive Fisheries Survey Report, Rock Lake, Jefferson County 2014 published May 2015”. A portion of the report can be found in the Rock Lake Management Plan 2018-2028 on the Rock Lake Improvement Association’s website, rocklake.org.

Northern Pike:

The northern pike population is self-sustaining and does not require supplemental stocking. The 26-inch minimum length appears to be sufficient in protecting enough males and females to facilitate natural reproduction. There was a decrease in the number of legal harvestable fish from 2014 compared to 2008. If the growth rates are found to continue to decline, a more progressive regulation such as a slot limit should be considered. Slot limits prohibit the harvesting of fish where the length falls within a protected range. For example northern pike between 24’ - 28’ may not be harvested.

Largemouth Bass:

The largemouth bass population is self-sustained by natural reproduction and does not require supplemental stocking. In 2008, the growth rate was consistent with the statewide average but was below the South Central Region. Changes in growth rate should continue to be monitored and if slow growth is documented, regulation options other than the current 14-inch minimum length, 5 fish daily bag limit should be explored. A slow growing population may not meet its potential under minimum length regulations as it may further reduce growth rate among sublegal-size largemouth bass.

Walleye:

Rock Lake currently supports a low-density walleye population. They were the dominant predator species in the 1970's. By 1985 the walleye population was reproducing each year but producing modest year classes. By 1992 very few (7) adult walleye were present in the fall electrofishing.

The walleye population is currently not meeting the established management goal for a stocked wallet fishery of 2 adults per acre. Population estimates conducted in 2014 and 2008 indicate a population size of .02 per acre and .06 per acre respectively. Despite multiple stocking events over many years (approximately 40 events and 6.4 million fish from 1974), may not achieve a management goal of 1 to 2 walleye per acre.

Recent stocking of large fingerlings (6-8") in 2015, 2017 and 2019 may reverse this trend and hopefully the 2020 survey will paint a brighter picture for this species.

Smallmouth Bass:

The small mouth bass population is naturally reproducing and stocking has occurred once in 1990.

The growth rate of this species in 2014 was below the 2008 average and both survey years were below the statewide average.

Bluegill:

The study indicates a lack of quality-size and preferred-size bluegills.

Bluegill growth rates in Rock Lake are below the statewide and South Central Region average. Due to the relatively slow growth, this species may not be able to withstand high intensity of exploitation without significantly reducing the percentage of quality-size fish in the population. The bluegill in Rock Lake may be food limited and, therefore, minimum length limit regulations would probably not improve size structure. Rather imposition of a minimum-length limit would probably further reduce growth rate. Efforts would be made to evaluate alternative solutions to regulating exploitation.

More information is needed to determine if the bluegill population size structure is indicative of the environmental conditions of the lake or the result of over harvesting. In addition, further study of the interaction between zebra mussel population and food availability to small panfish is warranted.

It will be interesting to see the results of the 2020 comprehensive fish survey which will help determine what ,if any, actions need to be taken to protect the Rock Lake fishery.

The Joint Rock Lake Committee and/or the Rock Lake Improvement association will publish the results and may hold a “fish talk” seminar to go over the results with a representative from WI DNR.