

2015-7

What would happen to the fishery (harvestable populations of key species) if the Oneida Lake season were closed for 1-2 years; i.e., would there be more fish in the (say) future year 4+ classes?

Based on a collective response from NYSDEC and Cornell fisheries biologists, a closure is a highly improbable concept. But as a concept, if only for discussion in the boat or over a beverage, the consensus and logic is as follows:

The easy answer is that yes, if there was no harvest allowed for 1 or 2 years it would result in more adult fish in the fishery at the end of the no harvest period than there would otherwise be. During the 3 year period when minimum length for walleye was 18" harvest totals were down and we saw increases in adult stock because we had (a) fewer fish removed from that stock, (b) continued recruitment into it from new age classes.

Over past several years we have seen open water harvest of walleye run about 60,000/year. Removing that source of mortality would obviously leave more adults in population, and adding new recruits would allow more growth in population numbers than with the harvest. Not quite as simple as leave 60,000 in and have an extra 60,000 next year, some of those fish would be lost to natural causes, somewhere along the lines of 5-10%, but that is a number that has historically eluded fisheries professionals.

For perch we don't have recent numbers for harvest, but back when we were doing the last full creel annual harvest was often over 100,000. So same logic, most of these fish would be there the next year if harvest was removed.

Would make the least difference for bass, which is largely a catch and release fishery - we seldom see more than 6-8,000 bass harvested annually, so removing that mortality would make only a small difference compared to walleye and perch.

Of course there would always be the outlaw harvest to factor in to mortality but like natural mortality that is a number we don't know.

The numbers of fish in the lake are now pegged to current the current ecosystem. In the last century+ man's influence on the waterway affected historic Atlantic salmon, American eel, cisco, sucker, and other fish populations. It is unlikely that the numbers of walleye and perch will return to historic levels that predate the invasion of the dreissinid mussels and double crested cormorants. We must recognize that change is constant, and be vigilant to programs (or lack thereof) adverse to the Oneida Lake attributes that we value.