



MAINE SPORT FISHING: GOOD, AND GETTING BETTER!

By Peter Bourque, Director of Fisheries Division

What's the overall condition of Maine's inland fisheries? Are catch rates as high as they were two decades ago? What about the average size of Maine's sportfishes? Well, if you asked thirty anglers you would get 30 different opinions. However, if an angler has not kept a good written account of his fishing trips over a long period of time, research shows that only the large fish tend to be remembered. So it's important to look at trends over the long haul before evaluating the state of Maine sport fishing.

Our state has over 5,000 ponds and 32,000 miles of rivers and streams. Fishery management responsibilities are entrusted to a small number of fishery biologists who have a deep concern for the resource and those who use that resource. The large number of waters help to provide a diversity of fishing opportunity, but unfortunately all waters have varying capacities to produce fish. Every lake or pond has its unique ecosystem with a specific carrying capacity. In other words, just like a garden produces a certain number of pounds of potatoes per acre, so it is with fish production in Maine ponds. Each can produce a finite number of pounds of fish per acre, so if a pond is dependent on stocking, it still can grow only a certain number of fish. Sometimes, when it comes to fish, more is not always better.

Has the quality of fishing changed in Maine? For well over 100 years Maine sportsmen have harvested salmon and trout as the species group of choice. Historical records from old sporting camps and angling groups show large numbers of large fish being harvested from many of our more popular waters. Unfortunately, creel records were not kept until Maine's fish management program began in the early 1950s. By that time, many of the larger salmon and trout (memorable fish) had been harvested, and as the postwar fishing pressure increased, were never replaced. For some lakes, the "cream of the crop" was gone, and until just a few years ago, no one was anxious to implement the necessary restrictive regulations to try and replace some of these larger, older fish.

It is true that the larger, older fish were virtually gone, but in many cases the catch rates per angler changed little when looking at the statewide picture. In other words, it is clear that we can maintain or even increase your chances to catch (play) a fish but, because of the low productivity of Maine waters many of those fish will need to be carefully released (reduced harvest rate) in order to keep future catch rates high. More people and more leisure time translates into more days of fishing, and remember that garden (pond) story, each water can grow a limited number of pounds of fish.

For these reasons, four years ago the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife implemented about 100 special, highly restrictive regulations, which generally resulted in very low bag limits, higher length limits and restrictions on terminal tackle (flies & lures) to reduce mortality from hooking since many more fish would need to be released alive. This was called the Quality Fishing Initiative. Following this initiative, special restrictive limits (bag and length) were implemented on some 400 wild brook trout ponds in order to conserve these important native populations.

With increasing angling pressure on bass, which is one of Maine's most popular game fish, the Department biologists recommended greater protection for this valuable game fish. Through research conducted in Ontario, we have learned much about the importance of the older, larger smallmouth bass in these northern climes. In order to protect these fish, not only for the excitement they provide anglers but for their spawning potential, Maine also implemented very restrictive bass regulations.

Will these changes work as planned? Biologists have already begun to closely monitor the new regulations on many of these waters. They, as well as many anglers, are already reporting changes for the better. Catch rates are increasing and in many instances there are more larger fish in the populations. Although not necessarily attributable to the new trout regulations, some new records have been set recently on a number of coldwater game fish. This is not to minimize the fact that with fisheries management there are miscalculations, problems and invariably a downside. We will make mistakes, and in a couple of instances, biologists have already liberalized some of the new, trout regulations reverting back to the general law (6 inch length limit with a 5 trout bag limit.) In the case of bass, tournament anglers and guides are reporting larger fish. Maine has a wonderful fisheries resource and it is getting better. Despite all of our special regulations, most of Maine's waters can be fished under the general fishing rules, especially the brooks and streams. We want to continue to provide a diversity of fishing opportunity across this state. Our new regulations, and improved hatchery fish, our hard work and cooperation from all anglers will contribute to the improvement of Maine's sport fisheries for the foreseeable future.

For those who still want a good feed, who feel that Maine's reduced bag limits on our coldwater gamefish is unfair to those who want to eat fish, remember that most of Maine's warmwater species have a greater spawning potential and will continue to provide that opportunity for a fish fry. You'll note that most of our warmwater species have no bag or length limits. But, what may be the downside of some of our warmwater species? Unfortunately, many illegal introductions of perch, bass and other highly competitive species in coldwater habitats will preclude the possibility of ever restoring some of our formerly excellent salmon and trout fisheries to their historical past. Those waters will still grow a finite amount of fish and in many instances, what once occurred as pounds of salmon and trout have now been converted to perch or other competitive species with a much higher reproductive capacity.

There are many other issues regarding Maine's sport fishery, not the least of which is the rearing and stocking of fish and the general management of our fishery. Among anglers, biologists and policy makers alike, there needs to be considerable thought and debate about our fish culture program, introduction of new strains of trout, exotic fish, habitat changes and the need for the

kind of regulations that will safeguard Maine's valuable sport fishery while at the same time providing diverse and high-quality angling opportunities for all to enjoy.