



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.

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Minutes

Wednesday, November 5, 2008

Ram Conference Center

10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Approved January 7, 2009

Attendees: Denny Grinold, Forrest Williams, April Bennett, Jim Johnson, Clarence Smith, William Jacobs, Tom Cadwalader, Doug Scheuneman, Paul Wendler, Charles Pistis, Brandon Schroeder, Ji He, Jim Dexter, Larry DeSloover, Steve Scott, Dave Borgeson, Kelley Smith, Tom Keerl, Tom Pawlaczyk, Jim DeClerck, Jerry Lawrence, James Shutt, Judy Ogden, Gene Raymond, William Becks, Ken Merckel, Bill Leichtman, Shirley Martin, Capt. Terry Walsh, Kathrin Schrouder, Frank Krist, Ron Beyer, Ed Retherford, Gene Kirvan.

10:00 Welcome and Introductions (Chair Frank Krist and Kurt Newman, MDNR)

Frank welcomed a new member to the committee, Captain James Shutt, who is the Upper Peninsula representative of the Michigan Charter Boat Association. James has several years of experience fishing the waters from the Mackinaw Bridge to Drummond Island, including the St. Marys River.

Approval of minutes from the last meeting:

Frank asked if there were any changes needed to the minutes to the last meeting. The committee did not indicate any changes to the minutes were needed, so minutes were considered approved.

Everyone in attendance introduced themselves and the organization they represented.

10:05 Award Presentations

Kelley presented plaque with certificate of appreciation for Paul Wendler's efforts as chairman of the Advisory Committee, as well as his long history of Natural Resource conservation. Paul was a former Natural Resources Commissioner (Milliken appointee); Paul detailed the circumstances around his appointment. Paul also recalled the first days of salmon fishing in Michigan and the immense fishery produced from the salmon stocking program. Paul emphasized his thoughts as to the role of the advisory committee, how we can disagree on the details, but remain supportive of Natural Resource management.

Kurt Newman presented an American Fisheries Society award to Howard Tanner, his election to the American Fisheries Society Management Hall of Excellence. Kurt described Howard's career, including his role in bringing Pacific salmon to the Great Lakes as part of an integrative

program to balance the aquatic system and provide for an important sport fishery. Howard relayed a long ago proposal to give Howard and Wayne Tody an award for their efforts in establishing a salmon fishery, to which a few individuals today suggested that they wait 40 years to see the long term effects. Here we are, 40 years later.

10:30 Division Update (K. Smith, MDNR)

USDA has distributed a proposed interim rule for dealing with VHS. There has been enough interest generated around the country to postpone a decision until January. The proposed rule, if implemented, will make operations difficult for state agencies, but will be even more daunting to the private aquaculture industry. Fisheries Division has commented on the proposed rule and provided those comments to United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

The decision to whether to list the coaster brook trout as an endangered species is also pending. The need to make this decision is required by a court order, but nevertheless will also likely be postponed due to the volume of comments received and other contributing factors. Possible outcomes are to list coaster brook trout as an endangered species, to list but delay implementation, or not to list coaster brook trout.

Several regulation changes are imminent. A two gallon smelt limit will be in place April 1. Changes to spearing seasons will be implemented to mesh pike and muskie spearing and hook and line regulations, and also to allow whitefish spearing in the Great Lakes in November. An order dealing with VHS will also be put through. The DNR was waiting for APHIS to complete their interim rule, but will forge ahead knowing the likely delays in the APHIS process. The three rod and 5 salmon creel regulations are going forward as well.

The 2009 Fisheries Division budget is looking ok, but the Division needs to exercise caution considering the potential for revenue declines in this economic environment. There is a 2% general fund cut that, while it doesn't directly affect Fisheries' budget, may instigate indirect impacts.

Jim DeClerck recognized the difficulties state managers must deal with in tracking state agency budgets, and wondered aloud how Fisheries can manage effectively under the current circumstances.

Ed Retherford asked about implications if coaster brook trout were listed as an endangered species. Kelley said it would have great impacts on what we will be able to do in Fisheries management, even affecting other aspects of Natural Resources management. The Endangered Species Act has been abused, especially in western states, so that should serve as a caveat to us. Kelley explained Fisheries Division's stance on the subject of coaster brook trout, especially in regards to genetics and distinct population segments.

Frank asked about the Division's plans for walleye stocking this year. Kelley said the Division is looking at the possibility of ratcheting up the walleye program even more than the significant steps made last year, but is still looking for definitive information regarding egg disinfection. Before going forward with the program and involving two hatcheries, the Division needs to

carefully assess the large potential risks associated with that, considering that VHS contamination requires depopulation of infected hatcheries.

Lake Huron Strategic Plan Introduction (Kurt Newman, MDNR, Jim Johnson, MDNR)

Frank introduced the discussion by describing his assessment of the magnitude of the changes that have occurred in Lake Huron. Kurt emphasized that this effort is an establishment of a process that hopefully will stand the test of time, and will set us up to take care of all kinds of issues down the road. Kurt mentioned that all the Lake Advisory Committees are moving in this direction. Minnesota has developed a plan, and while painful at times in its construction, once completed it made managing in the subsequent years much easier.

Jim Johnson described the recent changes in the Lake Huron ecosystem, and the uncertainty of the future condition of the ecosystem. He relayed the thoughts of managers that led them to consider a new way to approach management of the system. Jim then began his powerpoint presentation, outlining the specific observed changes in the Lake Huron ecosystem, and depicted the current condition of the lake. Jim showed offshore comparisons of Lake Michigan, Lake Superior, and Lake Huron, showing Lake Huron's recent trend toward Lake Superior conditions in terms of productivity and zooplankton. This recent information emphasizes that the lake continues to change, and we are anxious to continue to obtain up-to-date information to document the situation. Jim then presented the theories of nearshore shunt and benthic shunt of productivity, which are a result of mussels locking up much of the production in nearshore areas and on the bottom of the lake, causing the decline of Diporeia, and depriving many fish a good source of energy that historically migrated up into the water column.

Jim described the need to develop a vision for the lake. Jim shared his views of possible positive futures for the lake. It could include substantial wild perch and walleye populations. Cisco could be an important player, considering their ability to feed on some of the existing zooplankters. Lake sturgeon, smallmouth bass, and lake trout could have productive futures if current conditions prevail.

Jim then shared the vision statement authored by the Lake Huron Basin Team, *"Provide sustainable, diversified, highly valued fishing opportunities in the face of a changing ecosystem."* This implies management will be agile and opportunity driven, requiring collaboration.

Some opportunities offered by alewife collapse:

- Walleye on the rise: Saginaw Bay, St. Marys River, with naturally produced fish prevailing. This calls for additional needed efforts:
 - Investigate commercial harvest and bycatch
 - Continue to follow Saginaw Bay walleye recovery plan
 - Plan for passage or removal of barriers to walleye movement
 - Expand nearshore assessment activities
- Yellow perch: Port Sanilac may be on the rise and Les Cheneaux Island area is seeing some recovery, with some issues identified:

- Poor survival, perch becoming prey items
- Lack of alternative prey
- Recreational/commercial allocation
- Cormorant control
- Diversify prey – ciscoes
- Complete management plan
- Manage cormorant
- Expand nearshore assessments
- Steelhead and Atlantic salmon: they may not be as affected by lack of alewife as Chinook and brown trout. Some outstanding issues and opportunities are:
 - Hatchery space
 - Use of pens for steelhead
 - Removal of barriers or incorporation of fish passage
- Ciscoes (lake herring), possible alternative prey and sport fishing utility
 - Discussion erupted concerning apparent decline in the western Les Cheneaux, and even Drummond Island fishery for cisco.
 - This requires careful observation, with the oncoming cisco year classes the first since decline of the alewife.
 - Cormorant control can contribute to better potential survival
 - DNR has pilot project looking into feasibility of stocking cisco, with another effort planned this month.
- Sturgeon
 - Jim showed a graphic of a possible new fish community as compared with the historic native populations. Jim discussed potential to expand sturgeon populations, with the possibility of a fishery to take advantage of increased populations.
- Brown Trout, some larger fish are showing up in the fishery (those few that have survived), some opportunities may help survival:
 - Control cormorants
 - Fall stocking is in place to try to get fish beyond some of the predators
- Lake trout under the new lake conditions
 - Will eat gobies, smelt
 - Thiamine levels have increased to acceptable levels
 - Lamprey under better control
 - Possibilities
 - Pulse stocking may help situation
 - Protect unclipped
 - Regulatory options
 - Evaluate recreational post-release survival in 2009
 - Reduce commercial gill-net effort (Ontario)
- Whitefish
 - Diet has changed dramatically
 - Gobies
 - Whitefish may be more susceptible to anglers
 - Mussels (eat estimated 1/3 of quaggas /year)
 - Quaggas high in thiaminase, will this affect whitefish egg viability?
 - Will cormorant control help reduce predation on young whitefish?

- Chinook
 - Plans
 - Any increase in lake herring might improve growth and survival
 - Evaluate 50% stocking reduction
 - Explore predator avoidance stocking strategies
 - Monitor reproduction
 - Monitor other prey species
- Other opportunities
 - Muskellunge
 - Commercial fishing management plan
 - Smallmouth bass population

Kurt reemphasized that it is the overall philosophy we need to explore, and the framework we need to develop to allow us to manage adaptively, and in a cooperative and agile manner.

Terry Walsh asked about the commercial fishing management plan, specific to Saginaw Bay. Jim said the plan is an effort to get prepared for any opportunities that may present themselves, in case money becomes available.

Ken asked what the break point between nearshore and deeper water. Jim said that he considers 90 feet is a pretty good depth to reference in this regard.

Bill L. asked why we would assume alewife would not recover, and why mussels might not decline naturally. Jim said walleye may have reached abundance to help provide predatory control on alewife. Chuck Pistis asked how confident we are in the ability to have a Chinook fishery in proximity to a growing walleye fishery, stating that this appears to be very difficult to sustain. Jim agreed that it is difficult to sustain chinook without a prey item to buffer predation. Judy stated that even though we have a diverse fishery, will people be able to take advantage of the offshore fishery if fuel costs remain high? Kurt stated that if we plan properly, we will be able to look at many different aspects of the fishery, and hopefully be able to adjust to what the lake has to offer, including the social and economic factors that influence the fishery.

Gene Raymond said that he believes walleye may take over Hammond Bay to a greater degree, based in part on information he has heard from gill net commercial fishermen. Ken asked about behavior of steelhead in regards to the new lake conditions, will they end up remaining closer to shore? How much time are they spending inshore, and how will any changes in distribution alter angling? These are just a few of the questions that have been prompted by the changing lake conditions.

Kurt reiterated that we need to match our values and desires to what the lake has to offer. Sometimes we may desire an outcome that the lake can not effectively support. We have to keep in mind that the proposed process will help identify where real opportunities exist. Terry Walsh agreed that we need to be cognizant of managing our resources effectively, not forcing species into areas that are not suitable.

Dr. Tanner addressed the group

This first day after the recent presidential election, Howard informed the group that he cast his first vote for president in 1944. He thanked Jim Johnson for the stimulating presentation and ensuing discussion. Howard passed along a memorable quote he attributed to former MSU president John Hannah; "If you want to raise something, go where it will grow." He reminded us that change is inevitable. Howard was pleased that the chairmen of the four lake advisory committees, and basin coordinators, were present today. Howard commented on the vast amount of water Michigan managers have to manage with limited resources. He says all organizations, agencies, and individuals need to work together on the large important issues that cross all areas of interests.

April Bennett (MUCC)

April indicated that they are collecting public comment thru November 26 on the Great Lakes Protection and Restoration Initiative, based on Great Lakes Regional collaboration. They have already held 7 of the 8 scheduled public meetings. The purpose of the meetings is to gathering feedback on the plan (MI Great Lakes Plan, our Path to Protect and Restore Michigan's Natural Treasures) and impediments in various watersheds. They want to celebrate heroes, list the tools needed to manage effectively, collect stories on how Great Lakes and inland waters are changing, and get input from the public on where Great Lakes protection and restoration efforts are most needed.

Schedule meeting dates for 2009 and the member's database (Frank Krist)

Frank suggested January 28th, a Wednesday, for the next meeting. Ken asked if January 7th might be better. We normally meet prior to the public stakeholder workshops, and April 4th (Bad Axe) and 18th (Alpena) are Brandon's suggestions for the fishing workshops hosted by Sea Grant. Frank and Kurt believed that April 1st would work well for the spring meeting, for many reasons. **Upcoming meetings were agreed to be held on: Jan. 7th, April 1st, June 24th, November 4th.**

Ken asked if Jeff Schaeffer would attend the fishing workshops. He will attend those, and Frank thought it might be valuable to have him come to the preceding Advisor's meeting as well.

Lake Herring Pilot Project and other research updates (Jim Johnson, MDNR)

Dave Borgeson outlined the upcoming plan for herring egg take in the St. Marys River. This is the continuation of the pilot project initiated two years ago to assess the feasibility to collect spawn, and rear lake herring at a production facility. The project is a cooperative venture with the Chippewa-Ottawa Resource Authority, Lake Superior State University, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and Michigan DNR participating. This year's effort is an attempt to see how different egg collection times, and associated degree of ripeness, will affect egg viability.

Ken Merckel and Frank Krist mentioned a proposal that could involve federal hatcheries in the rearing of herring and whitefish. Frank will send out information on the proposal to get committee's comments on it.

2:00 Salmon returns at the weirs and N. Lake Huron updates (Dave Borgeson, MDNR)

Dave Borgeson said that early in the salmon run, the Little Manistee Weir was not getting a large number of salmon ready to spawn. The Swan River Weir harvested 4173 chinook

salmon. In three days of egg take activities, Fisheries personnel collected 2,454,118 eggs from 611 females and shipped the eggs to Thompson, Platte, and Wolf Lake hatcheries. The egg viability was good at all hatcheries with 79% eye-up at Thompson, 85% eye-up at Platte Lake, and 90% eye-up at Wolf Lake. The fish harvested were considered to be in excellent condition, and were very aggressive at the weir. The egg disinfection procedure was followed, and samples for contaminant analysis were collected. Four school groups were shown the egg take process.

2:15 S. Lake Huron updates (Kathrin Schrouder)

Kathrin outlined Southern Lake Huron activities including: walleye tagging in the Tittabawassee, lake and stream surveys, completion of 3 Status of the Fishery Reports, completion of Tittabawassee River assessment (with comment period ongoing), Singing Bridge repair and access project, extension of creel survey, largemouth bass study participation, and many other activities.

Discussion about movement of walleye ensued, how far they stray from tagging locations. The larger fish move large distances.

2:30 Fall brown trout stocking plan (Kurt Newman, MDNR)

The plan for Lake Huron brown trout is to cut plants, and stock only 85,000 fall yearlings. The fall stocking of larger fish will hopefully help to avoid predation, both by fish and cormorants, and take advantage of the recent increase in emerald shiners that show up inshore in the fall. Lexington (10,000), Harbor Beach (20,000), Port Sanilac (10,000), Tawas (20,000) Alpena (20,000), and Rogers City (5,000) are the chosen stocking locations. We will get winter creel in place this year, prior to stocking at the southern sites. The plan is to stock for three years (2009-2011), and continue the creel survey one year beyond the third year of stocking. If there is a significant response in the fishery, we hope to detect the increase in the regular creel survey. Some hog brown trout have been caught in recent years, and if increased numbers of these show up, increased effort should follow. Chuck asked about creating a buffer to predation by rearing forage to stock simultaneously with brown trout. Kurt said that rearing of forage to buffer stocked fish is not part of the foreseeable future of our hatchery program. October is the target stocking date for the fall yearling brown trout.

In order to better evaluate the progress of the plants, no other brown trout (spring yearlings, etc.) will be stocked in Lake Huron throughout the duration of this test period. After completion of the 3 year project the plan will be evaluated and the background, details and recommendations of the study will be incorporated into the Lake Huron Brown Trout Management Plan.

Stakeholder Updates:

Forrest Williams, Michigan Fish Producers: Forrest said that whitefish numbers were down, but prices were up. Forrest is anxious to see the Commercial Fisheries Plan.

Clarence Smith, Walleyes for Iosco County: Clarence asked about extension of the lake trout season, as they are catching more lake trout into the fall. This prompted additional discussion, including the unknowns related to lake trout recruitment, and it was decided to parking lot this issue for future discussion.

Tom Cadwalader: Cheboygan River fall chinook returns were good. Net pen operations in spring went off smoothly. Steelhead and lake trout are in the river now. Summer anglers were catching ATS in Lake Huron. The Cheboygan Dam project is finished.

Gene Kirvan: The salmon and lake trout fishing in the Oscoda area were very good from early July through mid September. The lake trout were large and very few had to be returned. The fish were mainly eating smelt up to 3 to 5 inches long and occasionally cisco were found in the Chinook. Walleye fishing was very good near the mouth of the Au Sable River during May. Even though the Chinook fishing offshore was the best since 2002, the run this fall in the river was poor. Gene caught 5 lake whitefish trolling this season which is an increase from the average of about one per season.

Ed Retherford: The cormorant control program to protect the brown trout plant in Thunder Bay was a success and 819 birds were shot and over 100 stomachs collected. The salmon fishing was very good but the best fishing started later in mid August and continued into late October. Fishing pressure was light during the most productive period. Fishing for Atlantic salmon was good during April and May.

Ron Beyer: The salmon and lake trout fishing at Harrisville were down. During the fall, however, there was a good runs of salmon in the harbor after a strong northeast winds. Steelhead seemed to be on the rise. Only one charter boat is operating out of Harrisville, as opposed to previously being the home to 8, with Oscoda down to 2 charters and Tawas 0.

Terry Walsh: The walleye fishing in Saginaw Bay was excellent this year with few fish having to be returned. Most fish ranged in size from 16 to 21 inches with some as large as 7 pounds. A 6 person limit could be filled in as little as 2 to 3 hours. In spite of the good fishing, the pressure was low. Perch fishing was slow with 6 to 7 perch being a normal catch. Very few catfish and drum were caught, with a rare large brown trout harvested as well. White perch and white bass catches were down. More cormorants were present in the area. Few locals were fishing and only 4 charter boats were operating out of Au Gres.

Ken Merckel: Walleye and lake trout fishing was good in the Thumb area but Chinook fishing was poor. Salmon did not return to harbor at Harbor Beach.

Gene Raymond: There is a tremendous amount of fishing pressure for walleyes in the St. Marys River because of the numerous tournaments. Perch fishing has been good around Brimley Bay. In the Les Cheneaux Island area, there is a good splake fishery during the winter in 10 to 20 feet of water but few may be harvested because the size limit of 22 inches that applies to lake trout also applies to splake. The splake are usually smaller than 22 inches. Lake trout are not caught in the shallow water during the winter and there did not appear to be a need to enforce the 22 inch size limit for splake to protect lake trout during the winter. The cisco fishery was down this year.

Judy Ogden: The trout and salmon fishing was good during April and May but into June and later the fishing was down.

James Shutt: The fishing in the reefs off of the Les Cheneaux Islands was good with many Chinook and lake trout caught. The fish were not huge but the condition was good. Lamprey marks were down. Fall fishing for perch was very good and it appears that the efforts to control the cormorants had a significant positive effect on the perch fishery.

Jerry Lawrence: The walleye fishing from Bay Port to Port Hope was very good until mid September. Some of the best fishing was in water from 35 to 70 feet. Jerry was concerned that planting cisco in the Saginaw Bay may reduce the number of walleye surviving each year because of possible predation on the young walleye by the cisco. Could the cisco depress walleye reproduction like the alewives have apparently done?

Bill Leichtman: Activity at the DNR ramp and marinas down. Bill had question on ballast on boats and a discussion came ensued on status of bill. Apparently it went through the house and stalled in Senate

Tom Keerl: There was very good walleye fishing during the spring off of the harbor break walls in Harrisville. The walleye were easy to catch but few anglers were participating. The salmon fishing in the Harrisville Harbor was much better this year and the condition of the fish was good.

Frank Krist: The lake trout fishing was good from mid May through the end of the season. The fish are common in 10 to 20 feet of water until about mid June. The lake trout were feeding heavy on gobies and about three years classes of smelt. The smelt ranged in size from about 1.5 to about 4 inches. Chinook fishing was about twice as good as last season. The salmon fishing started toward the end of June and continued into mid October. Most of the Chinook and lake trout were caught in water less than 100 feet. An unusual number of rainbow trout were caught throughout most of the season.

3:00 Adjourn