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Tribal fishermen reduce bycatch with new nets

New "legged" gill nets catch larger whitefish; drastically reduce lake trout catch, zebra mussels and slime

BY BRENDA AUSTIN

SAULT STE. MARIE, Mich. — For years, tribal commercial gill net fishermen have been trying to reduce lake trout bycatch in northern Lake Huron and now a new gear has proven successful at doing just that. Since the Great Lakes Consent Decree was implemented in 2000, tribal commercial fishermen on Lake Huron have been reaching or exceeding the lake trout harvest limit.

Fishers are limited to 500 pounds of lake trout a day, which at times means fishermen might have to discard lake trout caught in their nets.

Management of the gill net fishery in northern Lake Huron was becoming increasingly difficult because of the discard

and harvest limit problems. To help alleviate these problems, the Intertribal Fisheries and Assessment Program (ITFAP), explored a fishing method developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff out of Alpena, which has greatly reduced the lake trout catch in their annual survey netting activities.

The fishing method is called "legged gill netting." The twine of a normal gill net sets on the bottom of the lake, but the twine on a "legged" gill net is elevated about three feet off the bottom. With legged nets, fish that swim closer to the bottom,



ITFAP Biologist Mark Ebener said ITFAP adapted a net developed by the Alpena USFWS.

such as lake trout, will swim under the twine and not be caught in the gill net as often. Based on early results from ITFAP's studies that compared standard versus legged gill nets, the legged gill nets made a significant difference in reducing accidental catches of lake trout. These results are so promising that the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is also conducting a similar study in Ontario waters of Lake Huron. Mark Ebener, ITFAP assessment biologist, said there is a large multi-agency effort on the Great Lakes to bring lake trout stocks back to naturally reproducing status as a keystone species. According to Ebener, lake trout disappeared out of Lakes Michigan, Erie and Ontario by about the 1960s with small populations continuing to exist in Lake Superior and portions of Lake Huron. Since the '60s

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Researchers develop new way to reduce bycatch

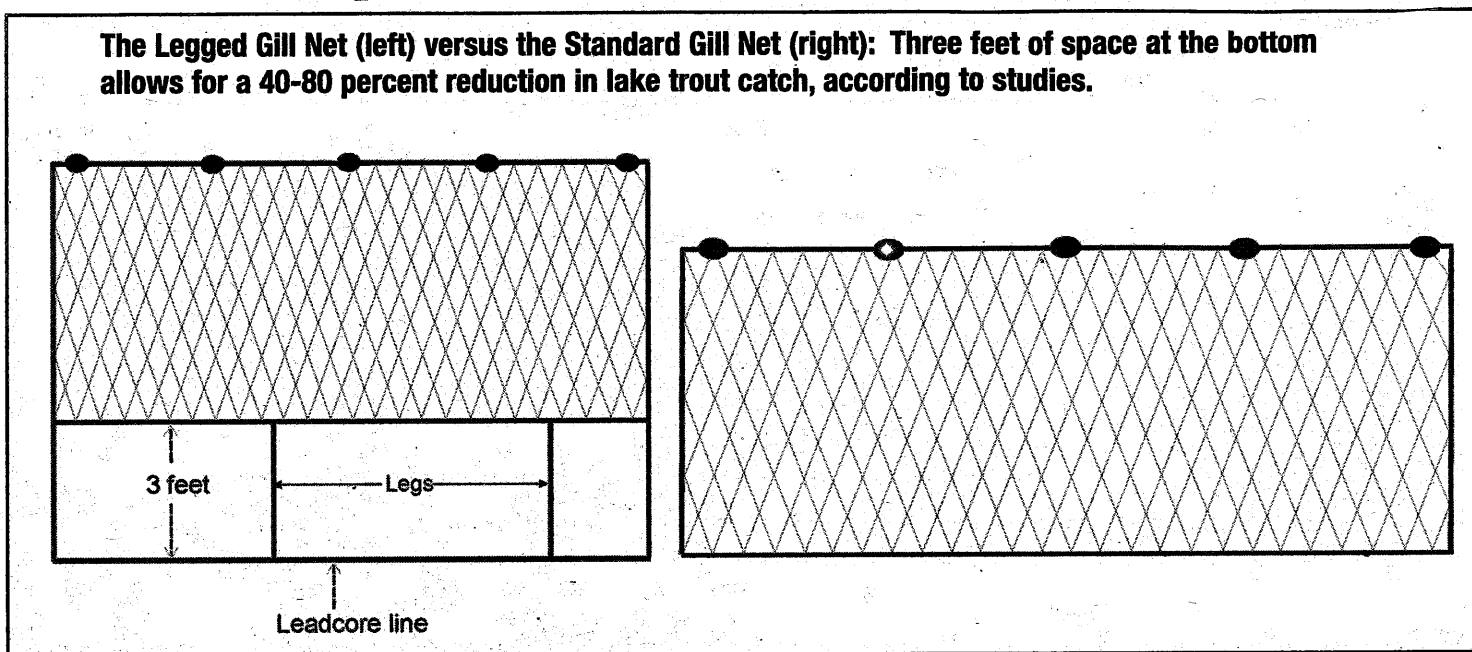
See "Reduce Bycatch," pg. 22 lake trout populations have recovered in Lake Superior and recovery is proceeding nicely on Lake Huron. Continued progress at helping lake trout populations recover partly involves keeping fishery harvests at acceptable levels.

Ebener said after reviewing results from gill net catches made by the Fish and Wildlife Service during 2005-08 showing a 80 percent decrease in lake trout catch using the legged gill nets versus standard gill nets, he decided to try it with tribal fisheries.

"We started an experiment in 2009 with the Bay Mills Tribe in a small area around Hammond Bay in Lake Huron. We used 16 gill nets – eight were legged nets and eight were standard gill nets. We gave them to one of the Bay Mills commercial fishers and asked him to keep track of the catches in both nets," Ebener said. "In the first year the results were amazing.

"Overall there was about a 40 percent reduction in lake trout catch with only a small eight percent reduction in whitefish catch."

The testing was repeated in 2010 and was again very successful. Ebener said that, based on studies, if 50 percent of the Sault Tribe large mesh gill nets in northern Lake Huron were replaced with the legged nets, tribal fishers would likely never exceed their lake trout quota. "It just wouldn't happen," he said. Sault Tribe fisheries are the 40-



largest harvesters of lake trout in that area followed by Bay Mills.

Ebener presented his findings to the Sault Tribe Conservation Committee and the board of directors, who had previously approved \$40,000 from the fishermen's fund to construct 100 new legged gill nets. The nets were given to Sault Tribe commercial fishermen, in exchange for the same number of their existing nets, which were then converted into the legged nets and returned to them.

About six Sault Tribe commercial fishermen agreed to participate in the study and use the legged nets. At first, most fishermen were skeptical, but by the end of 2010 word had spread about how effective the new nets were and others were

eager to participate. Ultimately, 189 legged gill nets were put into the Sault Tribe fishery in northern Lake Huron.

As an added bonus, fishermen realized after using the legged nets that they weren't pulling in the hundreds of pounds of zebra mussels they often did when using the standard gill nets. With legged nets, they were also able to avoid much of the green algae (*Cladophora*), which often "rolls" along the lakebeds and clogs their nets and dramatically reduces the catch of fish. Algae can also be so thick at certain times of the year that it actually destroys the standard bottom set gill nets.

Another positive aspect of the legged nets is that since they are raised three feet off the bottom they also extend three feet

higher than the standard gill nets, and at certain times of the year they will catch some of the larger sized whitefish, which tend to move up off the lake bottom as the water warms.

"The standard nets didn't even see those larger whitefish," Ebener said. "The guys have discovered that this new gear works well for a variety of reasons."

The study is expected to continue and be expanded this summer as a result of additional funding ITFAP received from the USFWS. This funding will allow for the purchase and construction of more legged nets that will be distributed to tribal fishers.

Ebener said some of the fishermen have decided to make their own legged nets at a cost of about \$26 a net. One of the

first fishermen to use the nets in the 2009 study has converted 10 of his standard gill nets to the legged nets. "I am also putting up four com

mmercial trap nets with legs on them," Ebener said. "In Lake Huron, trap net fisheries are not allowed to retain lake trout. Most of the fish caught in trap nets are alive and can be released alive. The legged net reduces the number of lake trout being caught and discarded by trap net fisheries, which we then have to count against our quota."

For information about how to convert standard gill nets to legged nets, or for more information about receiving free legged gill nets, contact Mark Ebener at ITFAP by calling (906) 632-0043 or by email at: meberner@lighthouse.net.