

Hammerhandles - Stocked Walleye Lakes at peril

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Hammerhandles, Slimerockets, and Grass Snakes are names given to the abundant small Pike in our stocked Walleye lakes. They are bait stealing, jig and lure thieves. As much fun as they are to fight, they usually are greeted with unkind words.

Jim Lilienthal, Anglers for Habitat, has studied this problem for years. Recently he spent over 2000 hours studying DNR gillnet data on "1,000 stocked lakes". His review makes it clear how high density small pike populations (greater than 7 per gillnet) have damaged walleye and yellow perch populations in 52% (372) of these lakes in Central and North Central Minnesota, where 71% of the walleye stocking takes place.

A serious problem with small pike is not new information. Leaders in the angling community have long asked the DNR to address this. Lilienthal, a retired DNR Area Fisheries Manager, has long seen this increasing problem go unaddressed. Ignoring the issue has caused at least a 50% reduction in the walleye harvest potential for anglers, decimated yellow perch populations, and insured a future of ever smaller and more abundant pike.

Comparing Whitefish and Gull lakes, the 2011 survey of the "Whitefish Lake Chain" shows 17.3 northern pike per gillnet with 95 percent less than 24 inches long and an average weight of 1.68 pounds. The yellow perch were at a record low 1.21 per gillnet and a total of 1,825 northern pike were caught in the chain's sampling nets. Every lake in the chain is at true problem pike levels.

The walleye population is a low of 3.92 walleye per gillnet on Whitefish Lake (the rest of the chain is much lower) despite some of the highest walleye stocking rates in the state.

The Gull Lake fish survey shows 4 northern pike per netting that average about 4 lbs. each, had 18 yellow perch per net, and about 9 walleye per net. Yet, Gull Lake receives about only one quarter of the walleye stocking that the Whitefish Chain has gotten over the last ten years. High small pike density is the main difference between the two lakes.

We are convinced that our current statewide northern pike regulation is a total fish management failure. The blame for this not only lies with antiquated fish management, but also with us as anglers. One of the best ways to control high densities of small pike is to have ample numbers of larger pike in the lake. Harvesting big Pike seems to be programmed into us. Articles in fishing publications are filled with tips, how to's and stories on catching monster pike.

Some anglers consider taking big Pike a God given right. If we are fishing on a slot lake, we harvest fish as close to the slot as possible. Research shows us that these high-density problem pike populations are not likely to improve without drastic intervention.

We need to consider highly liberalized harvest and possession limits for pike less than 24 inches long. The challenge for us as anglers will be to change our ways. We need to harvest small pike and pass this practice on to our children and other anglers.

“But it won’t work”, “Nobody wants to keep them”, “They are too much work”, “ You can’t change how people have been fishing for the last 50 years”.

True, die hard walleye anglers aren’t likely to switch over to Hammerhandles. Nor will the big Pike hunters. It is not likely that spear fishermen will start taking home 20 inch Pike. But those who “get it”, will realize that we need to start selling the harvest of small pike.

A good example is being set by a Bemidji resort community, who have put together a DVD for their guests on how to fillet, prepare, and cook boneless pike.

Using the boneless method to fillet a small pike, produces the equivalent of 2-4 panfish fillets. If we aren't managing to improve pike sizes and against high-density small pike populations, we aren't managing northern pike.

The current statewide pike regulation does neither. Compounding the problem is that the Legislature tied the DNR’s hands to implement new special fishing regulations for northern pike.

What is needed is a new Statewide Northern Pike Bag limit. But there isn’t a silver bullet to fixing this problem.

However, there are some positive results being achieved with special regulation lakes. On Sand Lake a bag limit of 9 pike with a 22 to 36 inch protected slot and one pike over 36 inches seems to be producing larger pike.

It is truly time for Minnesota to change it’s hammerhandle-producing statewide northern pike regulation, explore up to three separate pike management zones with pike regulations that reflect the reality of the current pike population structure in those zones, and manage pike as the top predator that they used to be. No one wants the high numbers of pest pike that exist in so many Minnesota lakes. We can do better (And by the way, we will have more and bigger walleyes).

More articles about achieving quality size Northern Pike populations in Minnesota :

Doug Smith, MPLS Star Tribune: [Legislative intervention has tipped fish balance in scores of lakes](#)

Jeff Sundin, Fishrappor.com: The Quest For Quality Pike In Minnesota . [Northern Pike, The Quest For Quality](#)