



Lou Pixley

The Good ^{New} Old Days

Although Lake Ontario's trout and salmon fishery has undergone changes through the years, fishing has never been better.

By Al Schiavone

It was a cool, brisk morning with early hints of dawn barely providing enough light to organize my equipment for a day on Lake Ontario. Interrupting the brief moments of solitude were sounds of the day's start—rumbles of nearby charter boats preparing to leave the dock, anglers loading and launching their boats, and excited voices anticipating the day's catch. As I prepared to head out onto the lake, I wondered what the day would bring. Would I catch many

fish? Would I break a state record? Would I be able to add a coho or steelhead to my typical catch of browns?

Steering the boat towards my favorite offshore spot, I reflected on my years of fishing this spectacular Great Lake. I remember well when New York State DEC started to ramp up their Lake Ontario trout and salmon stocking program in the late '70s and early '80s; it seemed as though everyone was anxious to test their

fishing skills on this newly created "gold mine." The completion of DEC's Salmon River Hatchery in 1980 was cause for celebration among anglers—more than six million fish were being stocked annually into the lake at the stocking program's peak. And more fish stocked meant more fish caught.

As the fishery took off, new fishing techniques and equipment were introduced to my part of the world. Local

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tackle shops now sported such unfamiliar items as downriggers, dodgers, flashers, deepwater trolling rods and reels. It didn't take long for word to spread of the great bounty that Lake Ontario offered, and the pure adrenaline-pumping joy you felt when a 35-pound king salmon stripped line off your reel faster than you could imagine. There were days when there were so many boats on the water that trolling amongst all the boats and fishing lines became chaotic.

The new fishery was a welcome boon for the local economy. New businesses catering to anglers seemed to appear overnight, and every port had more charter captains than you could shake a stick at. There was plenty of good fishing to be found, and like many other local anglers, I took full advantage of the opportunity. In spring, right after ice-out, we'd catch brown trout close to shore. Later, we'd shift our attention to cohos and rainbows. Lake trout were our "go to" fish; they were more predictable and always seemed available when other species weren't.

The "big daddies" and stars of the new Lake Ontario fishery were Chinook salmon (or kings), and every angler, myself included, wanted to catch one of these giants. Kings hit hard from July right through "staging" in late August/September when they congregated near shore prior to making their fall spawning runs up lake tributaries. During spawning runs, tributaries like the Salmon River were packed with anglers standing shoulder-to-shoulder. The fishing was incredible and every roadside and parking lot sported more out-of-state than in-state license plates. Never before had we seen fish this big, some 40 pounds or more, swimming up creeks you could almost jump over! In fact, apart from a few of us who had ventured to Alaska or Lake Michigan, no one had ever experienced this type and quality of trout and salmon fishing.

Fishing remained great, and over the years I caught lots of large fish. But as time passed, many peoples' interest in the

New York State Conservationist, June 2009

sport seemed to fade. By the early 1990s, I noticed there were fewer boats out on the water, even though the fishing was good. My fishing buddies said that things had dropped off on the tributaries as well, and we'd discuss what this meant. After much debate, we came to the conclusion that the novelty had simply worn off and anglers were choosing to fish closer to home. While this may have been bad for local businesses, some of us anglers were secretly happy because fewer fishermen meant more fish for us.

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A decline in the number of anglers fishing wasn't the only change occurring in the Lake Ontario fishery at the time. Better wastewater treatment was improving water quality, which meant fewer nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorous entering the water. At the same time, two new invasive species—zebra and quagga mussels, introduced into the lake by overseas cargo ships—were filtering small plant life out of the water. Before the mussels arrived, you couldn't see the

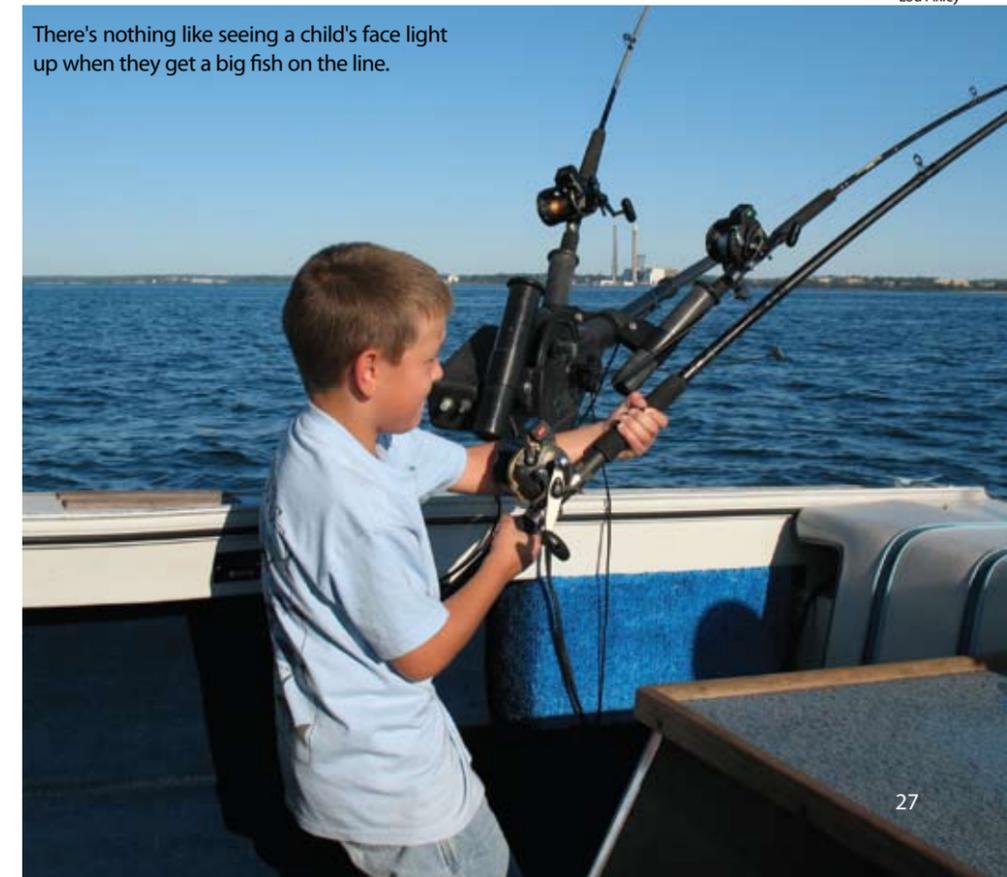
lake bottom in 15 feet of water; after they colonized, you could see bottom in 40 feet of water in some areas. This meant a huge change in the lake's ecology.

Scientists studying the lake were concerned for the fishery, saying that the "productivity" of the lake was declining, somewhat like a garden lacking fertilizer. The large populations of bait fish (mostly alewife) that trout and salmon relied on for food began to decline. Scientists felt there were too few alewife to support the number of trout and salmon, and in

1993, the DEC reduced the number of fish being stocked into the lake. To say this was a controversial decision would be an understatement. As you can imagine, anglers and local businesses largely opposed the stocking cuts. It was all over the media. Most of us thought it would be the end of the fishery as we knew it, but we were wrong.

Looking back now, I, as well as most of my fishing buddies, recognize that the quality of the fishery really didn't decline

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Connect to Nature

If you'd like to try your hand at trout and salmon fishing, but you're not sure how, check out www.ilovenyffishing.com. There's information on how and where to fish, locations of marinas and tackle shops, fishing charters, lodging, derby information, contact numbers for County Tourism Offices, and more.

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DEC photo

During spawning runs, tributaries can be packed with anglers hoping to catch a large salmon.

like we thought it would. Yes, the number of anglers fishing the open lake continued to decline, but we chalked it off to the negative publicity of the stocking cuts. Later, DEC increased the number of trout and salmon stocked, and we all thought that would bring anglers back in numbers, but it didn't. It turns out that a decline in fishing participation was happening all across the nation, not just in the Great Lakes. In fact, New York State has actually lost fewer anglers overall than any of the other Great Lakes states.

The real culprit in the declining number of anglers may be that kids just aren't getting outdoors to enjoy nature like they used to, and that's too bad. I love to take my grandkids and their friends fishing; there's nothing like seeing their faces light up when they get a fish on the line.

Having fished Lake Ontario's waters for many decades now, I know one thing to be true: the only thing predictable about Lake Ontario is its unpredictability. Change seems to be the only constant. After zebra and quagga mussels, overseas cargo ships accidentally introduced spiny water fleas, round gobies, and now bloody red shrimp into the Great Lakes watershed. The subsequent effects to the lake's ecology have scientists concerned about the stability of lower food webs that feed the lake's top predators, as well as the long-term effects of these invasives on the quality of the sport-fishing industry. Alewife numbers never did return to their former abundance, and my biologist friends at DEC say they are still worried about creating

an imbalance between numbers of alewife and their trout and salmon predators. Just a few years ago, the alewife population in Lake Huron crashed, resulting in three-year-old king salmon that weighed less than ten pounds—half of what they should be. I heard that a lot of charter boat operators and other businesses had to close up shop. My buddies don't think that could ever happen here, but I suppose that's what the folks on Lake Huron used to say, too.

I know that DEC and other agencies are keeping a close watch on the fishery (i.e. lower food webs, alewife numbers, salmon growth), and they say our Chinooks are still the biggest of all the Great Lakes—averaging over 20 pounds for three-year-olds. I can attest to that. In fact, in my experience, trout and salmon fishing is actually better now than in “the good old days.”

Occasionally, when I come off the lake from a day of fishing, I'll get asked a bunch of questions by DEC angler survey agents. They want to know how long I fished, what I caught, and whether I released any fish. Often they'll ask to measure my fish. The survey's been running since 1985, and DEC gives anglers a summary of the results every year. So even though it's sometimes inconvenient to stop and talk when all I want to do is get home and clean my fish, I don't mind too much. Heck, I figure if it helps DEC keep the fishing good, then it's well worth my time.

And the fishing is great. Over the past six years, fishing for Chinooks has never been better, and anglers have broken the

records for both coho salmon and rainbow trout. On top of that, I can't remember many years that had better fishing for brown trout. While I don't fish Lake Ontario streams in the fall like I used to, my buddies say the fall salmon runs have been as good as ever, and they can't remember seeing more steelhead in the streams than they did this past spring. For an angler, life is good.

At last, reaching my destination for today's outing, I pulled my thoughts back from reminiscing and into the present. I put the engine into neutral and surveyed the scene. Good, only a few boats in the area. Reaching my downriggers and looking out on the beautiful day, I was struck by the thought—why don't more folks fish this gold mine in our own backyard?

Easing the boat into gear and beginning to troll, I began to anticipate what today would bring. It made me think about all the times I've been out here, and all the fun I've had. Letting my mind wander again, I reflected on how one of the good things about getting older is being able to look back on your life and think about all of the changes that you've lived through. My buddies are always grumbling how much better things were in the good old days, and most times I can't argue with them. But when it comes to fishing Lake Ontario, make no mistake, these are the good old days!

Longtime angler **Al Schiavone** continues to fish small and large waters in New York's north country. He recently retired from DEC where he was the Region 6 natural resources supervisor, and before that the regional fisheries manager.