March 14, 2019

To: Owasco Lake Angler Cooperators

Dear Fellow Anglers:

Thank you for participating in the Finger Lakes Angler Diary Program! We have summarized the data from your 2018 diaries and are pleased to send you the annual summary. Your 2018 diaries and new diaries (if necessary) are included for your use with this distribution.

Open Water Trout and Salmon Fishing

In 2018, five (5) Owasco Lake open water cooperators logged 130 legal salmonids in 113 trips for an average catch rate of 1.15 legal fish per trip. These cooperators had a catch rate for legal salmonids of 0.39 fish per hour and caught legal salmonids on 85% of their trips. Brief summary results by species are included below.

Lake Trout
Owasco Lake open water cooperators caught 119 legal lake trout, of which nine (9) were kept (92% release rate). Lake trout comprised 92% of the total open water salmonid catch. The largest lake trout reported in 2018 was a healthy 33 inch fish. The average length of all lake trout caught was 20.3 inches, on par with the average lengths reported over the last 10 years. Most lake trout (100) were caught in mid-late summer (July-September) in areas around the north end. Additional lake trout were caught in May, June and October around the north end and near Burtis Point. Several fish were also picked up in July at the drop-offs around the South end. In 2018, legal lake trout comprised 94% of the total lake trout catch (only 6% sub-legal).

*2017 Errata: Lake trout numbers reported in the 2017 Owasco letter were lower than actual due to an inadvertent omission of data from our 2017 Owasco Lake dataset. In 2017, in stark contrast to the 14 fish originally reported, 86 lake trout (of which 85 were of legal length) were reported by 4 contributing open water anglers. Lake trout comprised 97% of the open water salmonid catch in 2017. Lake trout lengths reported in 2017 ranged from 14 to 32.5 inches, and their average length was 22.3 inches. Additional revised summary data for 2017 is reflected in the Owasco Lake Coldwater Fishing Summary table included at the end of this report.

Rainbow Trout
Owasco Lake open water cooperators reported catching 11 rainbow trout in 2018, which measured between 12 and 28 inches. The average length of the rainbows caught was 19.3 inches. The rainbows were caught sporadically throughout the season, primarily around the north end of the lake and near Burtis Point. The total open water rainbow trout catch reported likely understates the potential of the current rainbow fishery in the lake. Several past cooperators who were self-dubbed rainbow trout enthusiasts left...
the program over the past couple seasons, and the lack of their annual submissions is again evident in this year’s data set.

**Brown Trout**

No brown trout were reported by our coldwater open lake anglers in 2018. This is somewhat surprising but given the relatively low number of open water cooperators and low ratio of brown trout to lake trout and rainbows in the lake, is not entirely unexpected. Brown trout have been caught in mid-summer lake nettings in both 2016 and 2018 with fish running upwards of 12-14 pounds!

**Owasco Lake Coldwater Diary Cooperator Catch Rate**

The above graph shows the catch rates (fish/trip) of legal salmonids caught by our Owasco Lake open water cooperators from 1966 through 2018 and the relative contribution of each species in the catch over time. Catch rates are used to remove the effects of having varied numbers of cooperators and trips from year to year. Note the actual data are provided in the attached summary tables.

**Owasco Lake Tributary Fishing**

In 2017, six (6) Owasco Lake tributary cooperators caught 94 legal rainbow trout (plus an additional 183 sub-legal fish) and 65 legal brown trout during 76 trips and were successful in catching at least one legal fish in 62% of their outings. The number of cooperators and trips in 2018 was typical of the last decade and is holding at a relatively low level – however catches were outstanding relative to most recent years.
Anglers released nearly all (99.6%) of the rainbows caught and 94% of all brown trout! The largest rainbow trout caught was an impressive 28 inches, and the largest brown caught was 21 inches. Most rainbows (87%) were caught in April and December in the Owasco Inlet and Hemlock Creek. The majority of brown trout (86%) were caught in the Owasco Inlet in April and December. The total numbers of legal rainbow and brown trout reported in 2018 were far higher than in previous years and are likely indicative of both increased effort/reporting, and, fingers crossed, potentially an increasing number of adult rainbows and browns returning to the tributaries to spawn!

**Owasco Lake Warmwater Fishing**

In 2018, six (6) Owasco warmwater cooperators made 123 trips on the lake. Those anglers caught 151 smallmouth bass, 57 northern pike, 13 largemouth bass and three (3) walleye. Anglers were successful in catching at least one legal warmwater gamefish on 81% of their outings, with it taking, on average, 2.3 hours to catch one legal fish. Overall, this excellent catch rate is similar to that observed in 2015 and 2016, and is very good compared to the prior ten years. The numbers of smallmouths and northern pike caught were good compared to the prior ten (10) years. With only six (6) reporting warmwater cooperators, it is likely indicative of the anglers’ growing interest and ability to target these species in this lake. The smallmouth bass catch was better than 2017, and the highest it has been since 2001. The largest reported fish caught of each species was as follows: largemouth bass – 22 inches, smallmouth bass – 21 inches, northern pike – 40 inches, walleye – 27 inches. The size ranges of largemouths, smallmouths and northern pike caught were all indicative of healthy populations. Only three (3) walleyes were caught (23 - 27 inches), and their mature size and lack of relative abundance in the warmwater catch reflect either the fact that their population is in decline due to the cessation of stocking, a lack of anglers specifically targeting walleye, or a combination of both factors. The low walleye catch may also be attributable to an increase in forage (smelt/alewives) in the lake. Creel studies such as those conducted on Oneida Lake have shown that a strong forage population typically lowers the catchability of walleyes, i.e. if the fish are well fed, their tendency to take an offering from an angler decreases and they become harder to catch.

The majority of northern pike were caught in May and June near Long Point and around the shallow flats at the north and south ends of the lake. Smallmouth bass were caught in good numbers from May through September, with the majority of fish being caught at the north end and in the vicinity of Long and Burtis Points. Largemouth bass were caught sporadically from June through October, and catches were predominately at either end of the lake where more expansive areas of aquatic vegetation occur. The three walleye were caught in early summer at the south end of the lake and in the vicinity of Burtis and Long Points.
The graph above shows the catch rates (fish/trip) of legal warmwater species caught by Owasco Lake warmwater cooperators from 1978 through 2018 and the relative contribution of each species in the catch over time. Catch rates are used to remove the effects of having varying numbers of cooperators and trips from year to year. Note the actual data are provided in the attached summary tables.
Fisheries Monitoring and Management Considerations

We last conducted a standard index gill netting survey on Owasco Lake in early August 2016. Results indicate that overall lake trout abundance is trending downward in the lake, but the population is maintaining a stable age distribution and the fish are in good condition. It is interesting to note that approximately 99% of the lake trout observed in this survey were clipped fish of hatchery origin. There is virtually no natural reproduction of lake trout in this waterbody, and the fishery is supported almost entirely through state stocking efforts. Although not specifically targeted in the survey, baitfish are a standard component of the catch as well, and it appears, relative to recent surveys, that the forage base in the lake (at least rainbow smelt) appears to be increasing. This survey will be repeated in 2020.

Experimental gill netting efforts were also conducted in 2016 and 2018 specifically targeting rainbow trout and walleye to identify if this method could be utilized as an effective tool to assess those species in the lake. We set eight (8) overnight gill nets spaced throughout the lake targeting thermocline waters (approximately 52-60 degrees F). Walleye and rainbows were caught in almost every net. The rainbow trout caught averaged 15.5 inches and 1.6 lbs. The most interesting result of this netting indicates, at least in the areas we sampled, that there are no walleye younger than 14 years old (23.4 inches average length, 5.5 lbs average weight). This confirms to us that there is currently little to no natural reproduction of walleye in the lake or tributaries. There were no walleye observed from any year-classes that would have been produced following the cessation of walleye stocking in the lake. The Finger Lakes Institute has also provided walleye age data from fish they collected in 2016, and their results mirror ours as well, with no fish observed under 14 years of age. The 2018 repeat of this survey yielded ten (10) walleye between the ages of 17 and 25, four (4) rainbow trout and 16 brown trout. Having little to no successful natural reproduction of walleyes in Owasco bodes well for continued restoration of the rainbow and brown trout populations. This experimental netting will next be repeated in 2020.

We last surveyed juvenile salmonids in Owasco tributaries in September of 2017. Results indicate that rainbows (and to a lesser degree, browns) continue to spawn quite successfully in Owasco’s tributaries. Hemlock Creek in Locke is our best producer of rainbow trout (consistently exhibiting densities of more than 2,500 young of the year fish per acre over three surveys in 2014, 2016 and 2017). Hemlock Creek is a much smaller shaded tributary and is fed by numerous cold springs, so this is not a real surprise. Wild juvenile rainbows were also abundant in the Groton reach of the Owasco Inlet. The middle reaches of the Inlet appear to be more favorable to brown trout production, along with Dutch Hollow Brook. These juvenile salmonid production surveys will be conducted again in 2019.

Relative to data collected through the diary program, lake trout continue to provide a productive coldwater fishery in Owasco Lake. Rainbow and brown trout still appear to be present in relatively low, but potentially increasing numbers in the lake (especially rainbow trout). Our stocking rates for browns and rainbows will remain about the same for now – although approximately 5,000 additional rainbows have been allotted to Dutch Hollow Brook annually in efforts to restore a viable spawning run in that stream. We are still confident that walleye and lake trout populations in the lake have been suppressing the rainbows and browns due to heavy predation on juvenile fish emigrating from the streams. We also feel that walleye and lake trout predation resulted in lower forage fish (alewife and smelt) abundance in the early 2000’s. The walleye population in the lake is still steadily decreasing due to our cessation of stocking and lack of significant natural reproduction, and the lake trout population continues to stabilize at a lower level following significant stocking cuts in recent years. As the effect of walleye and lake trout predation on
juvenile browns and rainbows decreases, we expect to see an increasing rate of recruitment of adult browns and rainbows in the lake, and hence a more robust tributary fishery as well. This is not a short-term rapid change, but we should continue to see fishing (both open water and tributary) improve each year as time goes on. Ultimately, we would still like to see brown and rainbow trout account for an increased proportion of the total catch of trout from Owasco Lake.

***We are currently drafting, revising and reviewing recreational fisheries management plans for all of New York’s Finger Lakes. When these plans are complete (likely late 2019/early 2020) they will be available for public review and comment. Please keep your eyes open for them and feel free to provide us with comments!***

**Recruiting Call!!!!**

Please help us recruit new anglers to the Finger Lakes Angler Diary Cooperator Program – we need participating anglers now more than ever, especially on Owasco and Otisco Lakes. We are encouraging our current members to seek out prospective participants and refer them in our direction. As you can see from this report, the catch data obtained from such a small group of anglers can hinder our understanding of what may be happening in the fishery. I am always happy to discuss the ins and outs of the program with new members, and can be reached via the phone number or email below.

Thank you again for your participation in the Owasco Lake Angler Diary Program, your contributions are greatly appreciated! I wish you continued success on the water in 2019!

Sincerely,

Ian R. Blackburn

Aquatic Biologist – NYSDEC Region 7 Fisheries
ian.blackburn@dec.ny.gov
(607)-753-3095 x254
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*Lengths are from kept fish only
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*Lengths are from kept fish only*
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*Lengths are from kept fish only
Owasco Lake

Area 1

Area 2

Area 3

Area 4

Area 5

Not For Use in Navigation

Owasco Lake

County: Cayuga
Surface Area: 6,793 Acres

Fish Species Present: Lake Trout, Rainbow Trout, Walleye, Yellow Perch, Smallmouth Bass, Rock Bass, Cisco, Chain Pickerel, White Sucker, Brown Bullhead, Common Carp, American Eel, Panfish

Scale: 0 – 9,950 ft