

## Sunfish Angler Survey

Jeff Loukmas, Warmwater Fisheries Unit, Central Office

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Sunfish (bluegill, pumpkinseed and redbreast sunfish) are widespread and abundant throughout New York and are very popular with anglers, accounting for approximately 547,000 angler days in 2017 (Duda et al. 2019). Sunfish generally provide harvest-oriented fisheries and are an important resource for New York anglers seeking both recreation and food. The statewide possession limit for sunfish is currently 50 fish/day and has been in place since 1996. There is some concern that the high daily limit may result in overharvest and lead to less than ideal size structures and lower quality fishing. The use of social media to quickly draw attention to high quality fishing opportunities and the widespread use of electronic fish finders and other devices to improve fishing efficiency have added to that concern. In addition, the high daily limit may no longer appropriately represent the current views that New York anglers have about sunfish as a recreationally important species.

To gain a better understanding of those views and sunfish fishing behaviors, a web-based survey was developed and delivered via a DEC Delivers Fishing and Boating newsletter email announcement to approximately 147,000 subscribers. The survey was active from August 29 – September 12 and included a brief background statement on sunfish fishing in New York. The survey instrument included the following six questions:

1. Have you fished for sunfish in New York in the last 5 years?  
*Yes (if Yes, respondents would go to question 2) / No (if No, respondents would go to question 6)*
2. How many days per year do you typically fish for sunfish in New York?  
*1-5 days / 5-10 days / 10-20 days / More than 20 days*
3. At what size would you consider keeping (i.e., harvesting) a sunfish?  
*Less than 6 inches / 6 inches / 7 inches / 8 inches / More than 8 inches / Would not keep a sunfish at any size*
4. How often do you typically harvest sunfish that you consider “keeper” size?  
*Never / Some of the time / Most of the time / All of the time*
5. Which of the following best describes the number of sunfish that you prefer to harvest on a typical sunfish fishing trip?  
*None / Enough for one meal / Enough for more than one meal but fewer than the daily limit / As many as possible up to the daily limit*
6. What do you think is an appropriate daily limit for sunfish?  
*50 / 40 / 30 / 20 / 10 / Less than 10*

There were 1,466 total responses, 1,416 (97%) of which were completed surveys. Almost 84% (N=1,225) of respondents had fished for sunfish in New York in the last 5 years and most typically fish for them 1-5 days (33%) or 5-10 days (30%) per year. Only 16% typically fish for sunfish in New York for more than 20 days per year. The most common sizes at which respondents would consider keeping a sunfish were 8 inches (24%) and 7 inches (21%). Another 21% of respondents wouldn't keep a sunfish at any size. Almost half of the respondents (48%) who would consider harvesting sunfish said that the size would be 8 inches or more. Most respondents either never harvest “keeper” size sunfish (28%) or only harvest them some of the time (48%), an indication that catch and release angling for sunfish is prevalent. This was further supported by the 28% of respondents who said that the number of sunfish that they preferred to harvest on a typical sunfish fishing trip was none. Of those respondents who preferred to harvest sunfish on a typical trip (N=871), almost half (46%) said they preferred to harvest enough for more than one meal but fewer than the daily limit. Only 15% preferred to harvest as many as possible up to the daily limit. The large majority of respondents (N=1,124; 79%) thought that an appropriate daily limit should be a number less than the current daily limit of 50. Of



those, 37% thought an appropriate daily limit should be 20, while 25% thought it should be 30 and 23% thought it should be 10. The percent of responses for each daily limit option varied only slightly when compared by the number of days respondents spent fishing for sunfish, with at least 75% of each group favoring a daily limit less than 50 (Figure 1). Respondents who were inclined to keep sunfish 7 inches or more, or not keep them at all, were more likely to choose a daily limit option of 20/day or less than those who said they would keep a sunfish 6 inches or less (Figure 2).

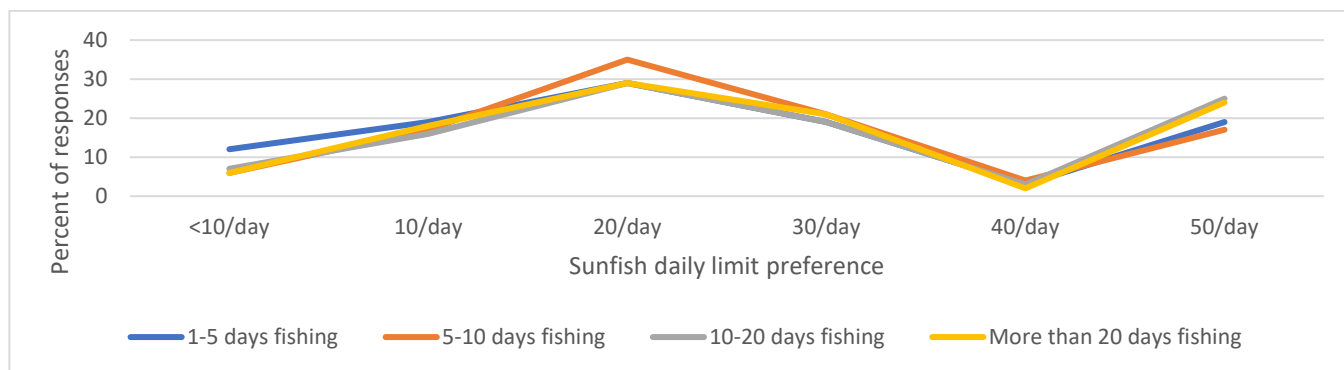


Figure 1. The percentage of responses for each daily limit option by number of days respondents spent fishing for sunfish per year.

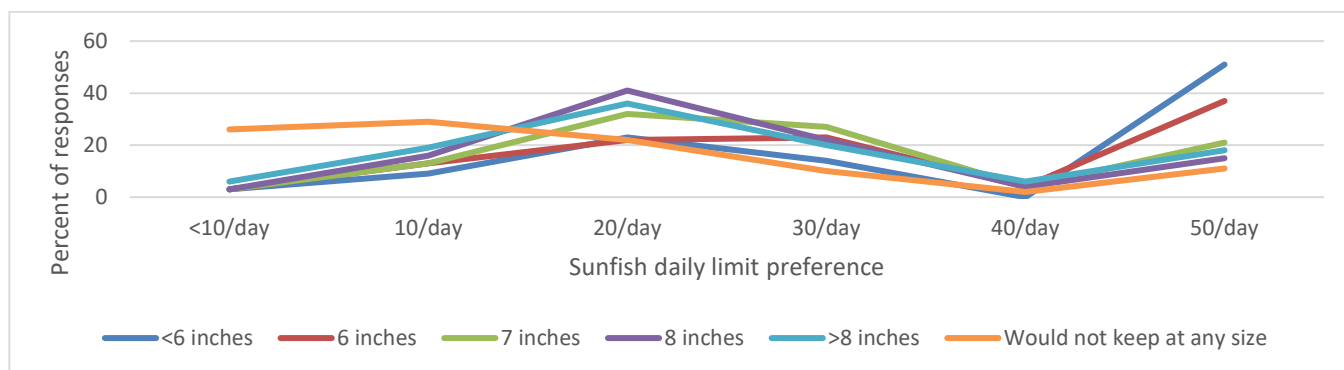


Figure 2. The percentage of responses for each daily limit option by the size at which respondents would consider keeping a sunfish.

The high number of responses from those who had recently fished for sunfish in New York provides confidence that the results were generally representative of the views and behaviors of New York sunfish anglers. For what is typically thought of as a harvest-based fishery, the very high percentage of respondents that indicated they either don't harvest sunfish or only harvest some of the time (76% combined) was somewhat surprising and indicates that sunfish fishing is also viewed, at least in part, as a recreational catch and release activity to most sunfish anglers. For those who do harvest sunfish, maximizing the number harvested up to the daily limit was not a motivation for most. This sentiment was likely reflected in the responses to the question regarding an appropriate daily limit, which the large majority (79%) thought should be a number less than 50 and more than half (57%) thought it should be a number less than 30. The results of this survey indicate that New York sunfish anglers have very diverse sunfish fishing views and behaviors and thus appropriate management of these fisheries perhaps should better reflect that diversity. Survey results suggest that there would be support for a decrease in the statewide sunfish daily limit. Also, given the high percentage of responses indicating that maximizing harvest up to the daily limit was not a motivation, and the preference of many to harvest larger sunfish, anglers may also be open to other management options, such as size limits or further reduced daily limits, to maintain or improve sunfish populations in certain waters.

#### Literature Cited

Duda, M. D., M. Jones, T. Beppler, S. J. Bissell, A. Center, A. Criscione, P. Doherty, G. L. Hughes, C. Gerken, A. Lanier. 2019. New York angler effort and expenditures in 2017: Report 1 of 4. Report for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Fish and Wildlife by Responsive Management. Harrisonburg, Virginia.