

## SENATE TESTIMONY ON THE STATE OF SAGINAW BAY YELLOW PERCH

We moved to Augres in the fall of 1971, and I was immediately introduced to incredible fall and winter perch fishing. Friday nights were all-you-can-eat-perch for \$2.50 at Ma's Restaurant in town. Anglers by the thousands lined the piers in Augres, Tawas and Oscoda. Any drainage emptying into the bay was full of perch and anglers of all ages lined the banks.

The limit back then was 100 per angler daily and it was easy to do. A small landing net was mandatory for the number of 10-13-inch perch being caught two-at-a-time. Today the limit is 25 per angler daily and DNR records show just over 12 perch per angler for a day's fishing.

Yellow perch fishing peaked in 1984 at over 1.2million pounds caught by recreational anglers. It remained at over 600,000 pounds until 1994 when the downward spiral began. By 2012 it would be barely 120,000 pounds and has never recovered.

So what caused the catastrophic decline? Alewife, zebra and quagga muscles, cormorants, and walleye all played key roles. Yellow perch were able to overcome alewife predation, but not the combined effects of the muscles, cormorants, walleye, and commercial fishing.

By 2003-2004 the zebra and quagga muscles had so heavily colonized the bay and Lake Huron, they drastically depleted the food web the alewife depended on for survival, and alewife all but disappeared along with a multi million dollar salmon fishery and, angler effort dropped a whopping 73%.

Alewife preyed heavily on the eggs and young fry of yellow perch and walleye. With alewife gone, young-of-the-year (YOY) perch populations exploded. However, in the

absence of alewife the bay's walleye population made a shift from them to the YOY yellow perch as walleye forage. The young yellow perch had escaped one predator only to be blind-sided by another. The zebra and quagga mussels disruption of the food web also made it harder for young perch to find enough food to get through their first year. Cormorants had now colonized the bay's islands by the thousands, each bird capable of eating its weight in yellow perch daily.

The minimum size limit of yellow perch for commercial fisherman is 8.5 inches. The annual commercial harvest has annually been somewhat more than \$100,000. A severe downside of the commercial fishery is the estimated "102,000 walleye and alarming number of undersized yellow perch that are casualties of the netting operations."

If yellow perch ever have any chance of again becoming a significant part of the recreational fishery, the variables suppressing their population have to change. Zebra and quagga mussels have no management solution. Cormorants are currently protected by federal law. Walleye numbers to some extent can be managed by increasing daily limits. Protecting yellow perch from commercial harvest is the only real alternative to rebuilding their fishery.

The recreational value of yellow perch far outweighs their commercial value. Fishermen spend money on bait, tackle boats, motors, food, lodging and gas. Bait and tackle shops, motels restaurants, party stores, grocery stores and gas stations all benefit from traveling anglers. Data gathered from the American Sport fishing Association showed nearly 400,000 nonresidents and 1.5 million state residents contributed 4.4 billion dollars to the state's economy while the commercial fisheries' state-wide contribution

was just over \$10 million. Whitefish made up nearly 90 percent of that amount, while yellow perch and numerous other commercial fish made up the final 10 percent.

Eliminating commercial yellow perch harvest would immediately put up to nearly 45,000 pounds (DNR 10-year harvest average) of 8.5 inch and larger yellow perch back into the Saginaw Bay fishery. Removal of yellow perch trap nets would eliminate the waste of 10s of thousands of pounds of dead, under-sized perch, walleye, northern pike, large and small mouth bass and other noncommercial species. Nearly 20 miles of trap nets stretching from north of Augres all the way down to north of Linwood would be eliminated, greatly improving day and night small boat navigation. The economic impact would provide a year-round boost for the Sunrise Side economy more than any other recreational fishery, as yellow perch are easy to catch any time of the year and make splendid table fare.

Right now, yellow perch provide marginal commercial and recreational fisheries at best. According to the DNR, "Their role has become largely that of baitfish for larger predators." It doesn't have to be this way. Eliminate the commercial fishery for yellow perch and there is every reason to believe they would quickly become the favorite sport fish of Saginaw Bay. It seems a crime to concede such a fine fish as yellow perch to nothing more than food for other predators and a handful of commercial fishermen.

