

Lake Erie

Walleye

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Vol. 7 No.2 • Summer 2001

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The Complete Fishing Scene on Lake Erie

Coverage of the Western, Central & Eastern Basins

Summer 2001

The 2001
Walleye Report

Diving Planes
for Erie 'Eyes

Fishing Erie's
Central Basin

Precision
Jigging

Steelhead
Madness on
Lake Erie

Erie Innovation
for Walleyes

Smallmouth on the Rocks

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Plus:

Walleye News & Fact File
2001 Walleye Tourneys
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On the Cover

Captain Timothy Garrett of Aqua Fantasea Charters with a Central Basin Summertime trophy walleye weighing in at 14 pounds

From The Editor

Boy, what a difference a year makes. Walleye fishing to this point (May 25th at this writing) has been fantastic; the best seen in several years, according to many charter captains. Walleyes have been caught just about anywhere in the western basin. Limits are common and the weather for the most part has been very cooperative. In the central basin there has been an excellent spring and early summer night-time and near-shoreline walleye bite.

Just a year ago catching walleyes was tough, and that's putting it mildly! In 2000 spring and summer fishing more often than not was nothing to write home about. In the western basin we couldn't consistently find the walleyes and when we did mark fish, the bite just wasn't there. Fishing for walleyes in the central basin was so tough that many charter captains switched to targeting steelhead trout. The steelies were there in great numbers. Good thing for that cause the walleyes were having fun playing hide and seek. Last year fishing didn't pick up until very late summer and into the fall, when walleye fishing suddenly turned into something truly special.

So what gives? How can a single year make such a difference? There are likely many factors but here are a few. **Weather:** The weather to this point in the season has been better than last year. Fewer fronts have allowed fisherman to get on the water more often. **The strong 1999 year class:** A very large 1999 walleye hatch has plentiful 2 year old fish swimming around and being taken by fishermen in big numbers. **Lower numbers of bait fish:** Potentially,

See Editor, Page 6

Lake Erie Walleye

Rick Kubb, Editor/Publisher

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Walleye News and Fact File

Water Levels Forecasted for Lake Erie

Lake Erie water levels are expected to remain 5 to 12 inches below their long-term averages during the coming spring and summer. But the ups and downs of water levels are a normal part of Lake Erie's life cycle, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR).

"In reality, Lake Erie is a dynamic, constantly changing body of water," said Dave Cashell, state hydrologist at ODNR. "In the mid-1930s, the lake was nearly 2 feet below its present level. In the 1950s and again in the 1980s, it was more than 3 feet higher than its present level. We must realize that change is inevitable when dealing with Lake Erie and adapt our plans and outlooks accordingly."

Some lakefront property owners and business people who grew accustomed to consistently higher-than-average water levels during the last 30 years may find that news difficult to accept. For them, lower water levels translate into reduced shipping revenues and difficult-to-enter marinas and boat slips. But ODNR experts encourage people concerned about present water levels to take a page from Great Lakes history before concluding that Lake Erie is suffering some sort of decline.

Officials first began measuring water levels in the Great Lakes in the mid-1800s. The present system of gauges began operating in 1918. Hydrologists have learned that lake levels fluctuate with the seasons and can vary dramatically over longer periods of time.

Long-term monthly averages have varied more than 6 feet over the period of time records have been kept. Water levels were slightly above long-term averages during the mid-to-late 1800s and generally below the long-term averages from about 1890

through 1967. From 1968 to 1999, levels were again generally above long-term averages. Annually, the lake also rises and falls about 18 inches with the seasons - losing water in the fall and winter through evaporation, and gaining water back during spring snowmelt and summer rains.

Short-term fluctuations, such as those that can be associated with a single severe storm, are the most dramatic changes. Because the lake is relatively shallow and lies southwest to northeast, strong southwesterly winds can blow surface water from Lake Erie's western basin to the central and eastern basins in a matter of hours. Veteran boaters know that a storm passing through Toledo can leave dock areas standing dry in that city while creating high-water conditions in Buffalo, New York. During severe storm events, the instantaneous difference in water levels between Toledo and Buffalo can approach 16 feet!

Cashell describes the Great Lakes system as interconnected "bathtubs," with each lake lower than the next. Within each lake, waters slosh around in response to changes in wind and atmospheric pressure. Lake Superior, at about 603 feet above sea level, is the highest. It drains into Lake Huron and Lake Michigan (considered one body of water), which in turn, drain into Lake St. Clair through the St. Clair River. Lake St. Clair drains into Lake Erie through the Detroit River. Lake Erie waters drop dramatically (about 326 feet in 35 miles!) into Lake Ontario through the Niagara River and over Niagara Falls. Lake Ontario waters travel downhill through the St. Lawrence Seaway into Montreal Harbour and the Atlantic Ocean.

About 80 percent of Lake Erie's water flows in from the Upper Lakes through the Detroit River. Another 10 percent comes from tributary rivers and streams, with the remaining 10 percent from precipitation falling on the lake's surface. The Detroit River inflow

is directly dependent on rain and snowfall around lakes Superior, Huron and Michigan. Unusually warm winters and dry summers in the late 1990s brought little precipitation and virtually no ice cover to the Upper Lakes, causing lake water levels to drop in those bodies of water, and subsequently, in Lake Erie. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which projects Great Lakes water levels six months in advance, said in February that Lake Superior was approaching levels last seen in 1926. The recent winter did not provide enough moisture to counter all the preceding dry years.

Despite “urban legends” to the contrary, there are no man-made gates regulating the outflow of Lake Erie waters through the Niagara River. Only lakes Superior and Ontario have artificial controls to influence levels and those levels are governed by agreements with Canada, Cashell said. Lower-than-average water levels have a positive impact on many aspects of lake life. Coastal erosion has decreased and beachcombers are finding wider stretches of sand for swimming and sunbathing, according to Mike Colvin of ODNR’s Coastal Management Program.

“The lake’s shoreline provides some of the best bird watching in the Midwest,” said Melissa Hathaway of the ODNR Division of Wildlife’s Lake Erie Unit. “The lower lake levels only enhance these viewing opportunities.”

Jim McCormac, a botanist and bird expert with ODNR’s Division of Natural Areas & Preserves, said North American shorebirds with the longest migration patterns like the Hudsonian godwit and long-billed dowitcher are spending more time along Ohio’s Lake Erie shore in the fall. The birds feed in the expanding marshes, building stamina for their long flights south.

New expanses of rare and endangered botanicals are finding homes in the mudflats created by lower lake levels. Most are sedges and rushes - some of the rarest plants in the Great Lakes region, McCormac added. “They grow, bear fruit and reseed on the newly exposed mud flats,” McCormac said. “When the waters recover them, those seed beds will remain dormant for decades before producing another plant. They are an important part of the biological and hydrological cycle of Lake Erie.”

According to the ODNR Division of Watercraft, most Lake Erie boat launches remain fully operable in these times of lower-than-normal water. Boaters should check for the best launch areas when planning a lake outing. ODNR always advises boaters to use charts when navigating unfamiliar waters.

Boaters should be especially cautious around the islands in the western basin and when nearing shore. Areas that may have been safe to pass over in the past, may have an underwater hazard in low-water conditions. Navigation charts for Lake Erie are available at marinas, bait shops and other outlets on the north coast.

Dredging projects made necessary by receding waters require advance planning since securing mandatory dredging permits from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can take several months. Limited funds are available to communities and public agencies for dredging assistance through ODNR. Commercial marinas, homeowners’ associations and private clubs are ineligible.

For more information about Lake Erie’s changing waters, check the ODNR web site at www.dnr.state.oh.us or call the ODNR Coastal Services Center at 419-626-4296 or toll free at 888-644-6267.

Walleye and Perch Quotas Set for 2001

In an effort to boost Lake Erie’s walleye population, fisheries scientists, working with the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC) met in March and agreed to cut in half international harvest quotas for walleye on the lake, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR).

The GLFC’s Lake Erie Committee met in March in Niagara Falls, NY and agreed to reduce the total allowable walleye harvest for the entire lake from 7.7 million in 2000 to 3.4 million fish this year.

The daily bag limit for walleye in Ohio waters of Lake Erie and its tributaries for 2001 will be four fish from March 1 through April 30 and six fish from May 1 through the last day in February 2002.

“Committee members agreed last year to set future quotas conservatively in an effort to stop declining walleye populations,” said ODNR Division of Wildlife fisheries biologist Mike Costello. “Toward that goal, Ontario accepted a decrease of nearly 2 million walleyes, confirming their commitment to rebuilding populations of the lake’s most popular game fish.”

The Lake Erie Committee is made up of fisheries managers from Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and Ontario. The group meets annually to determine the status of Lake Erie fish stocks and, establish international harvest quotas for each of those jurisdictions surrounding the lake.

“We are committed to doing everything we can to improve the Lake Erie fishery for the future,” Costello said. “It won’t happen overnight but we’ve laid the groundwork and shown that the entire team can work together to protect this important resource.”

Walleye harvest quotas are determined by a formula base on surface area within each jurisdiction.

Ohio and Ontario receive the majority of the walleye allocation catch for Lake Erie. Of the 2001 quota of 3.04 million fish, Ohio’s share is just over 1.7 million, about 51 percent of the total. Ontario’s share is about 1.4 million walleyes, about 43 percent of the total allocation.

“Our focus is to manage for improved growth in the walleye population,” said Costello. “Supporting this effort, both Ontario and Michigan have made similar changes in their bag limits.”

Based on the strength of the 1999 walleye hatch, fisheries biologists predict a brighter future for Lake Erie walleye fishing.

“The new quotas positively impact the ’99 year class fish, enabling them to contribute to the fishery for a number of years,” Costello said.

The total allowable catch for yellow perch in Lake Erie for 2001 was set at 7a.1 million pounds, up slightly from 6.57 million in 2000. Yellow perch quotas for individual jurisdictions surrounding the lake are based on a different sharing formula than walleye, involving surface area and past fishing performance.

Ohio’s share of the 2001 perch allocation is slightly more than 3 million pounds. Ontario will receive about 3.7 million pounds and Michigan, Pennsylvania and News York will share the remainder.

Ohio’s portion of the yellow perch quota is then allocated between sport and commercial fisheries. Sport anglers are allocated 64 percent of the Ohio quota, and commercial anglers 36 percent.

“Yellow perch stocks I the central basin are strong but we still have some concerns in the western and eastern basins of Lake Erie,” said Costello.

The daily bag limit for sport anglers remains at 30 perch per angler and existing commercial fishery regulations also remain in effect.

For further information contact: Mike Costello, ODNR Division of Wildlife (614) 265-6349 or Andy Ware, ODNR Media Relations (614) 265-6882

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From Editor, Page 2

the recent cold winter and ice conditions we had back in January could have killed off a number of bait fish. Fewer bait fish means for a stronger walleye bite.

Lower Limits: With the walleye daily limit lowered from ten to six fish, fishermen can more easily take their limit. I would bet that in the minds of many anglers their level of satisfaction would be greater taking 6 fish knowing they had 'limited out' versus taking 7-8 fish last year knowing they were short of their limit of 10 fish. Go figure.

Unfortunately, many anglers are missing out on the fun this year. Several charter captains I know have reported that their bookings are 'way down'. Low water and poor fishing early last year have kept many anglers from coming back to the lake. These things naturally go in cycles. Next year the captains could likely be reporting that bookings are up based on the great fishing experienced this year. Let's hope the fishing conditions keep up through the summer months and into the fall.

As a former Fisheries Biologist and current avid walleye fisherman I greatly appreciate the recent work of the Lake Erie Committee of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in significantly lowering the quota for walleyes in the lake. Their action of reducing the lake-wide Total Allowable Catch (or TAC) from 7.7 million fish to 3.4 million fish sends a message indicating that the walleye stocks in Lake Erie need help. Hopefully this action will mark the beginning of a strong walleye comeback.

Let's be cautious here, though. It's not realistic to expect walleyes to return to the numbers of the mid 80s. Why? Over the years the ecology of Lake Erie has changed from 'eutrophic' to 'mesotrophic to 'oligotrophic' meaning that the carrying capacity (how much biomass a lake can sustain) has been reduced. Since walleyes are at the top of the food chain in the lake, it is only logical to deduce that lower biomass at the bottom of the food change will carry forward to lower biomass (fewer walleyes) at the top.

That being said, we don't really know at this point how many walleyes good old Lake Erie can sustain. The recent fish management strategies in lowering quotas and limits will allow the walleyes to rebound some-

what. How much of a positive rebound only the future will tell.

With this issue we welcome two new writers to our staff. Bud Riser (remember Walleye Magazine?) brings incredible credentials. A seasoned veteran walleye fisherman, Bud will share his expertise and stories with us in the issues to come. Jeff Frischkorn, noted Ohio outdoor writer also joins us. Jeff has fished Lake Erie for many years and has a vast knowledge of "North Coast" fishing. Welcome Bud and Jeff! Good fishing to everyone this year and we'll see you on the water!

Editorial Correction

In the Spring 2001 issue the photo on page 31 was mis-labeled. The fish pictured is a King Salmon, not a Lake Trout.

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The 2001 Walleye Report

by
Rick Kubb

In each summer issue of Lake Erie Walleye Magazine, we provide a synopsis of the walleye fishery in Lake Erie based on the scientific reports produced by the fisheries management biologists from the states of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.

We'll report on the estimated size of the walleye population in Lake Erie, walleye growth and migration, catch rates, and other biological factors related to the walleye fish stocks in Lake Erie.

Walleye quotas for 2001

The Lake Erie Committee of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission for the third year in a row has reduced the total allowable catch (TAC) of walleyes. The TAC for 2001 has been set at 3.4 million fish, down 50% percent from the 2000 TAC of 7.7 million fish. The 1999 TAC was higher still at 10 million fish.

The committee took this action as a result of declining walleye fish stocks since the mid 1990s. It is believed that reducing the TAC by this significant amount over the next few years will help boost the walleye stocks.

Ohio and Ontario receive the majority of the walleye TAC. Of the 2001 TAC of 3.4 million walleyes, Ohio's share is just over

1.7 million fish, about 51 percent of the TAC. Ontario's share of the TAC is about 1.4 million fish, or about 43 percent. The remaining estimated 6 percent of the TAC is divided among Michigan, Pennsylvania and New York waters of Lake Erie.

Michigan Waters of Lake Erie

In 2000 anglers harvested an estimated 252,281 walleyes from the Michigan waters of Lake Erie. Of these, a total of 205,215 walleyes were taken by private anglers (81%) and 47,066 fish were taken by charter boat anglers (19%). Walleye fishing peaked in the month of July with 131,763 fish caught (Chart 1). More than 55% of the total annual walleye harvest occurred in the month of July. Overall angler effort in 2000 increased slightly to reach the highest level since 1994.

Age 2,3, and 4 (1998, 1997, and 1996 year classes) walleyes dominated the walleye harvest, comprising 87% of the catch. Harvested and age 2, 3, and 4 walleyes averaged 14.3 inches, 16.9 inches and 18.5 inches in total length.

In 2000 a total of 6,241 walleyes were tagged by Ontario, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Michigan biologists at eight Lake Erie sites. A total of 130 tags were

recovered by fishermen for a single season reporting rate of 2.3%. This inter-agency tagging study will continue to provide valuable information regarding walleye movements throughout the lake. Figure 1 indicates the locations where Raisin River tagged walleyes were recovered in 2000. Remarkably, a few fish from the Raisin River tag site moved as far east as Buffalo, NY to the far eastern basin of Lake Erie.

Ohio Waters of Lake Erie

In the year 2000 an estimated .93 million (combined private and charter catch) walleyes were caught in Ohio waters of Lake Erie. This is down just slightly from 1999 (chart 2). The year 2000 private boat harvest of .68 million fish was a 2% decrease from 1999. Targeted effort of 2.2 million angler hours was 16% lower than in 1999. Walleye harvest was the second lowest estimated since the survey began in 1975.

In 2000 there were a total number of 907 licensed charter guides. This was a four percent drop from 1999 and well below the peak of 1,209 licensed charter guides in 1989. The 2000 charter boat walleye harvest of .25 million fish was a dramatic 26% lower than in 1999. The majority of the walleye sport harvest was from the 1996

and the 1998 year class. Age 5 and older walleye constituted 30% of the lakewide catch.

Walleye size in Ohio waters averaged 19 inches and 2.4 pounds. The average size for walleyes increased from west to east (chart 3, figure 3). In District 1 (western basin) walleyes caught averaged 18.3 inches and just over 2 pounds. The average age of walleyes caught in District 1 was just under 4 years. In District 3 (eastern part of the central basin) walleyes taken were significantly larger and older, averaging 23 inches and 4.5 pounds. The average age walleye in District 3 was 6.5 years, over 2.5 years older than walleyes taken in District 1.

Walleye Diet

What were walleyes eating last year? In the western basin walleyes fed mainly on shad and alewives. These clupeid species represented 86% of the total walleye diet in the western basin. The diet differed dramatically in the central basin Ohio waters of Lake Erie. Central basin walleyes fed mainly on shiners and rainbow smelt (Figure 2). Walleyes also fed on round gobies in the central basin. The amount of round gobies found in the stomachs of walleyes has been fairly consistent over the past three years ranging from 5% in 1998 to 9% in 1999 and 8% in 2000.

Walleye Migration

Tag and recapture studies of walleye in Ohio waters over the years have indicated that these fish migrate extensively throughout the

lake. Figure 2 indicates where previously tagged walleyes (tagging sites were Sandusky River, Sandusky Bay and Cedar Point areas) were captured by anglers. The majority of the fish tagged from the Sandusky River, Sandusky Bay and Cedar Point areas were caught at points further east with some traveling to the far eastern basin of Lake Erie. Many of these fish migrate back to the western portions of Lake Erie during the fall months.

Pennsylvania Waters of Lake Erie

A very strong 1996 year class should sustain the 2001 walleye sport fishery at or near the 2000 level. This will still represent a general decline in walleye fishing success from the previous few years.

The numbers of older walleye are expected to remain in the population because of low exploitation rates and the Pennsylvania waters will produce good numbers of large 'trophy' sized walleyes in 2001. The large 1999 year class will also produce good numbers of 2 year old fish. These will show up in late summer walleye catches.

In 2000 anglers caught an estimated 84,410 walleyes in Pennsylvania waters. This represents a 9% decrease from 1999 levels. In 2000 walleye angler effort was estimated to be 244,116 hours, a decrease of 38% from 1999.

The walleye catch peaked in July (33,668 fish). Last year the fishing season was prolonged with excellent weather and anglers in Sep-

tember took over 20,000 walleyes (chart 4). The five year average catch for September is less than 5,000 walleyes.

The average size of walleyes caught in Pennsylvania waters in 2000 was 24.3 inches. This was an increase of over 2 inches from the previous year. Walleye age ranged from 3 to 12 years with 7 year old fish (93 year class) accounting for the greatest proportion (18%) of the catch.

New York Waters of Lake Erie

In 2000 the sport fishing angling effort in New York waters of Lake Erie was an estimated 424,563 angler hours which was the lowest seen in the 13 year time series of this creel survey. The lower fishing effort is attributed in part to difficult low water conditions that made it difficult to launch boats at several launch ramps. A total estimated walleye harvest was 28,594 fish, up slightly from the 23,134 walleye taken in 1999 (chart 5).

The 2000 walleye sport fishery was centered in offshore waters between Dunkirk and Irving, New York; areas east and west produced a markedly lower harvest. Walleye angling quality and fishing effort in the vicinity of Barcelona and areas east of Sturgeon Point were particularly poor during 2000.

The overall targeted walleye catch rate during the 2000 fishing season was .15 fish per hour which ranks walleye fishing quality very similar to the previous 7 years.

The average total length of walleyes in 2000 was 23.7 inches.

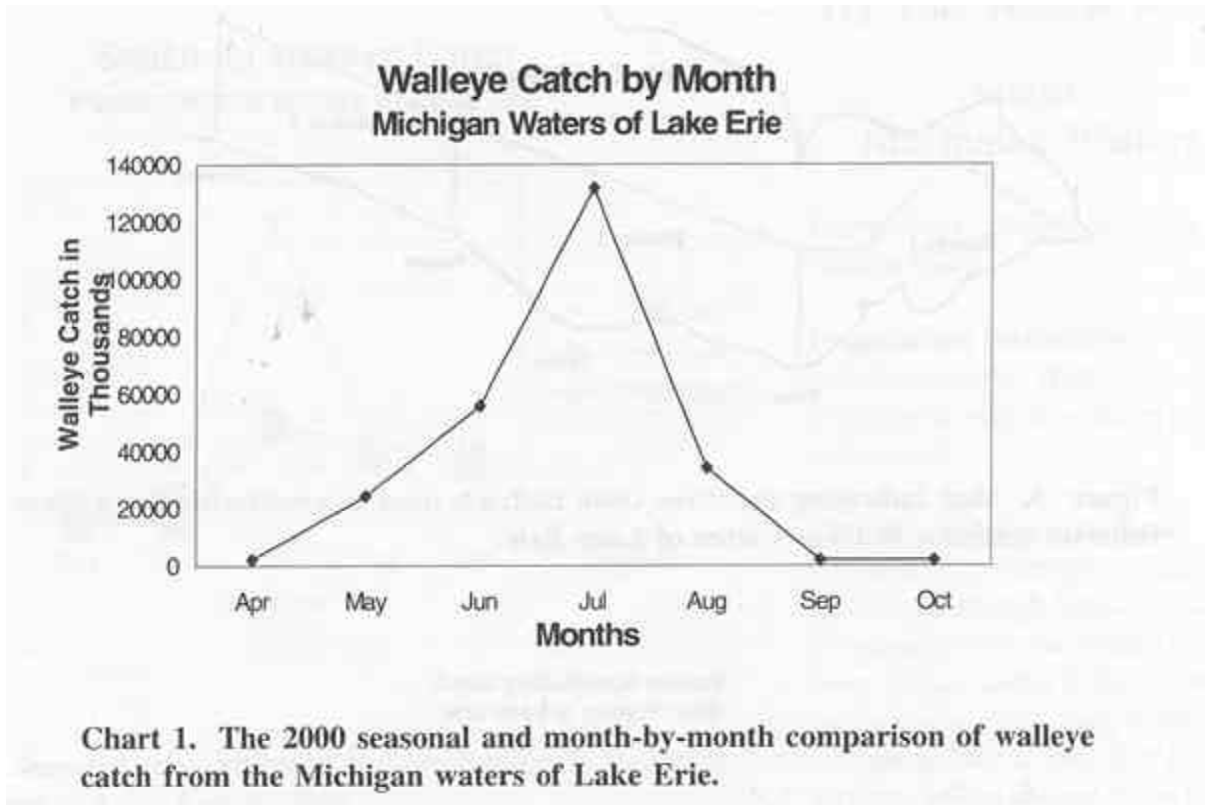


Figure 1. Distribution of walleyes tagged in 2000 from the Raisin River area (far left) that were caught in 2000. A few walleyes traveled the entire length of Lake Erie from this tag site.



Figure 2. Distribution of walleyes tagged in 2000 from the Sandusky, Ohio area. Many of these fish were caught at points east of the tagging area indicating a large migration pattern to the east during the summer months.

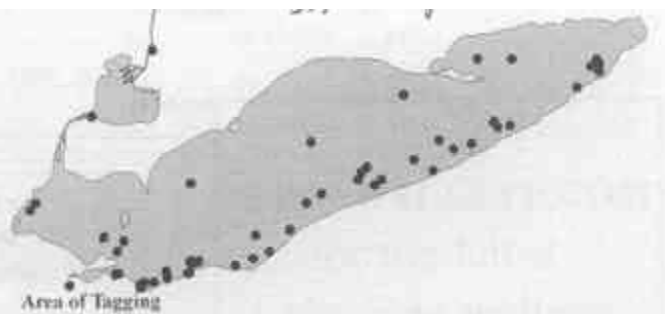




Figure 3. Map indicating the three Ohio Districts used in monitoring the walleye fisheries statistics in Ohio waters of Lake Erie.



Chart 2. Ten year comparison of walleye annual harvests from Ohio waters of Lake Erie.

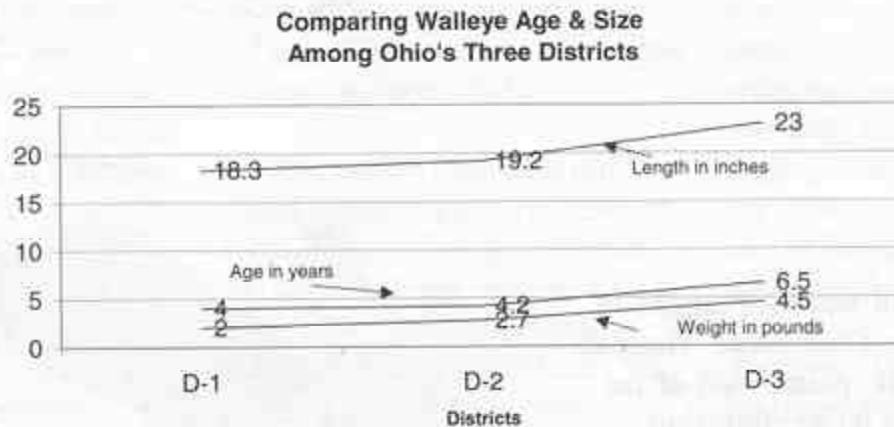


Chart 3. Comparison of walleye age and size among Ohio's three districts.

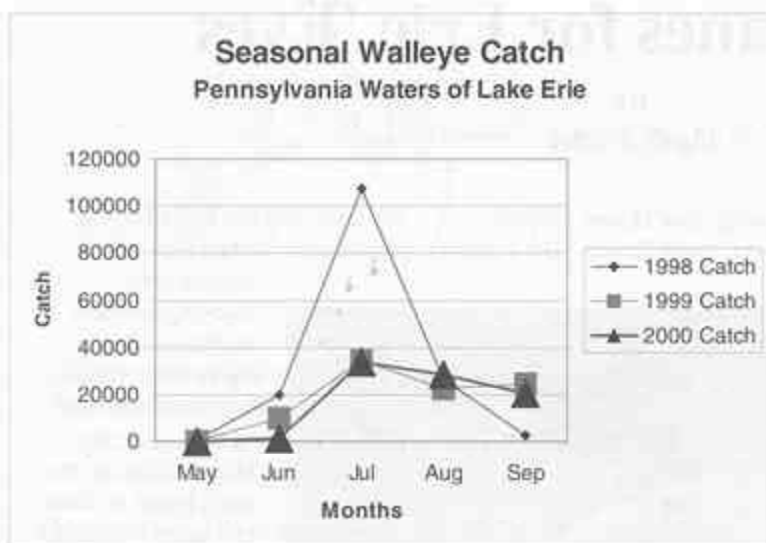


Chart 4. Seasonal comparison of walleye harvest in Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie in 2000.

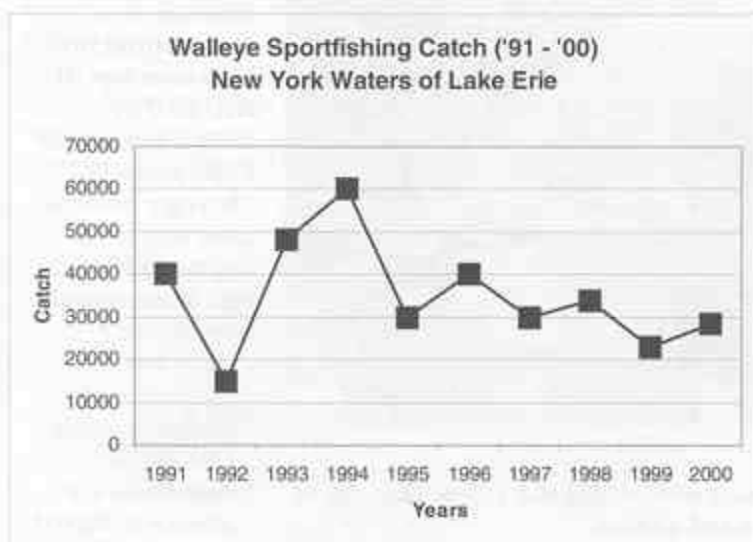


Chart 5. Ten year comparison of walleye sportfishing catch in New York waters of Lake Erie.

Try This Walleye Recipe

Simple Marinated Walleye

Ingredients: Italian Dressing & walleye fillets

Preparation Instructions: Fillet and skin walleye. Wash fillets and, if preferred, soak in solution to remove oil.

Place fillets in medium plastic container bag (storage or freezer type). Add enough Italian salad dressing to cover the fillets (Wish-bone Italian works well). Close the bag tightly and place in the refrigerator for at least four hours, turning the bag several times to be sure all parts of the fillets marinate.

Remove the fillets and place the fillets onto large pieces of aluminum foil, one fillet per sheet. Leave enough dressing with the fillets to keep them moist. Fold the aluminum over the fillets and seal each package.

Place each package of aluminum on a hot outdoor grill. Cook several minutes on each side, then carefully open the package (careful - it will let out hot steam). If not done, close up and continue to cook until fish flakes.

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