

Angler Interviews

By Ron Wilson

The first relevant creel survey in North Dakota was conducted in 1982 on Lake Sakakawea. A quarter-century later, fisheries managers continue to employ these face-to-face angler surveys to help manage the state's fishing waters in the public's favor.

"As fisheries biologists, we can sample a lake with a net and get a shot of what's in there," said Scott Gangl, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader. "To get some perspective from the fishing side of things, however, we need to talk to anglers."

What a creel survey reveals is manifold, such as how far anglers traveled to fish; how long they fished; what they're fishing for; what they caught; size of fish they caught; how many fish they caught per hour; harvest versus catch-and-release; and so on. "The answers to these and other questions help us paint a picture of the entire fishery, which helps us manage our fisheries based on what a lake can produce and also what the public wants to catch," Gangl said.

In the early days, Department fisheries personnel conducted creel surveys themselves. Today, Game and Fish contracts the services of a private consulting firm. Aside from creel clerks interviewing anglers on land after a day on the water, services also include use of an airplane to get an aerial count of angler activity on any given day.

Creels surveys aren't inexpensive, which is one of the reasons why the bigger fisheries like the Missouri River System and Devils Lake are scrutinized only every third year. The former was surveyed in 2006, and starting this month creel clerks will begin questioning anglers on Devils and Stump lakes through October 31, and then resume efforts during the ice fishing season. "You weigh the benefit and the cost . . . and what we've found is that these creel surveys are very valuable," said Greg Power, Department fisheries chief. Power, it so happens, analyzed the data on the first creel survey on Sakakawea

in 1982 as a graduate student at the University of North Dakota. "The data gathered over time helps us to make informed decisions on waters enjoyed by so many anglers."

Creel surveys, of course, are site-specific examinations. To gather insight into the bigger picture, what's happening on other fisheries around North Dakota, the Game and Fish Department mails questionnaires to resident and nonresident anglers.

Angler questionnaires, in one form or another, have been around for about 40 years. Twelve thousand questionnaires – 9,000 to residents and 3,000 to nonresidents – are mailed each year. The response rate varies, but if you get 40 percent returned, Power said, you're doing fantastic. "We track fishing effort, participation and where people fished," he said. "Years of responses provide long-term trends that are important to managing North Dakota's fisheries resources."

A creel survey was conducted on the Missouri River System in 2006. Creel clerks interviewed anglers at boat ramps like this one on Lake Sakakawea to gather insight into their time spent on the water.



CRAIG BIHRLE

No Fish Tales

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is conducting a creel survey on Devils and Stump lakes beginning this month.

Creel clerks will be stationed at various places at various times. Information gathered is useful in assessing angler demographics, harvest, catch rates, catch-and-release and angling effort.

Anglers are asked to cooperate with creel clerks and answer questions honestly. Angler interviews take only a few minutes, and the information is kept confidential.

The survey will run through October 31 and start up again once ice fishing season begins.

About every fifth year in these questionnaires, anglers are asked to list their fish of preference. Not surprisingly, walleye, northern pike and yellow perch – in that order – are the top fish.

Angler questionnaires also help fisheries managers get a feel for public sentiment on any number of issues. “Whether it’s stocking fish, putting in boat ramps or changing fishing regulations, we need to know if the public believes what we are doing is effective,” Power said. “It’s hard to get a feeling for that by a few phone calls coming into our office.”

The questionnaires are straightforward and simple to complete. There aren’t any questions pertaining to harvest, so you don’t have to worry about thinking back to how many perch or walleye you caught weeks or months ago. “We appreciate those questionnaires that are filled out and returned,” Power said. “Some people even take the time to add comments, and we read all of them.”

While the typical creel survey, like the one running now through the ice fishing season on Devils Lake, can last months, the Department has used this survey method to get near immediate results to specific issues. For example, the perception among some anglers was that too many walleye and too many large walleye were being harvested in

spring from Channel A, a diversion canal that drains into Devils Lake.

A creel survey conducted in April 2005 and April 2006 at Channel A, showed that anglers were taking less than 2 percent of the entire annual harvest of Devils Lake walleye.

Creel surveys aren’t often conducted on North Dakota’s smaller waters, Gangl said, because there are so many of these fisheries, the cost would be prohibitive. “On the small lakes, we do them on an as needed basis,” he said. “We do them when questions come up about certain waters.”

Without them altogether, Gangl said, fisheries management likely wouldn’t be what it is today. “If we’re not doing creel surveys, then we’re not talking to anglers as much as we should,” he said. “Without the surveys, there would be a disconnect from the public, which would make it harder to manage our fisheries the way people would like to see them managed.”

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Not surprisingly, yellow perch are one of the top three fish preferred by anglers in North Dakota. Heading the list are walleye and northern pike. This kind of information is learned from angler questionnaires.

