



MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

It's been a brutal winter compared to the last 10 years. Both wildlife and humans seem to have reached the end of their ropes in terms of endurance, given that we've had winter since before deer gun season started. As I write this column on March 24, yet another snow-storm is buffeting most of the state.

While we don't yet know the ultimate influence winter has had on fish and wildlife populations, there's no doubt there will be losses. It won't be until later this spring that we're able to get out and judge the extent of those losses, such as netting lakes to assess the extent of winterkill, conduct crowing counts to estimate the pheasant population, and so on.

As the saying goes, "Mother Nature can be a cruel mistress," and winter 2008-09 is a good example. She'll manage populations by removing individuals four different ways: old age, disease, predation and starvation.

Old age seldom is an issue in a hunted population, but the other three are critical factors. I'd add a fifth item to the list, but it is more a function of humans than it is of Mother Nature, and that's adequate cover. If we don't provide good habitat across the state, she will deal with wildlife populations in those aforementioned ways.

After we've fought floods and other fallout from winter, there is a bright side to the story. Low lakes will be replenished and those that were good fisheries in the past have the potential to regain that status. And dry wetlands that produced tens of thousands of ducks in the past will recoup their former productivity. That's the nature of smaller lakes and wetlands in North Dakota. They can produce good numbers of fish and ducks because of the wet-dry cycle, which oxidizes nutrients until water returns, providing a good base from which to begin anew.

Another benefit of winter snows is the water returning to lakes Sakakawea

and Oahe. It's been nearly 10 years since we've seen these kinds of water levels, which provide a psychological uplift for those who love to use these waters. If we, as fish and wildlife managers, had our way, we'd certainly bring water levels up in stages, but once again Mother Nature pretty much mandates how Missouri River reservoirs can be managed during times of high runoff. But no matter what happens, these fisheries will again flourish and boat ramps will be available to enjoy these gems of the plains.

While there are certainly a large number of benefits to water returning to our lakes and wetlands, I must urge everyone to be vigilant for aquatic nuisance species. This is an issue we've brought up numerous times over the past eight years and will continue to do so.

We've been fortunate in North Dakota that we've received relatively few of these nefarious plants or animals, and I have to credit users of our resources for at least part of that. But let's not become complacent. We need to be vigilant since many states around us are finding species such as zebra mussels at increasing rates. We don't want to become part of those statistics.

It's just the beginning of a great year, but don't expect some North Dakota fisheries of the past to quickly resume their old populations. It takes time. In this issue, fish stocking records from 2008 are listed, but you have to give these planted species from 2-4 years to create a fishery. Given good survival, these waters can blossom into very good fisheries in the future, which gives us plenty to look forward to.

I'm sure there are many of you who have developed cabin fever in the past five months or so and are itching to get outdoors. I encourage you to get out and enjoy what this great state has to offer, but remember to be careful in your adventures.

Terry Steinwand