

The Moon River Walleye Saga – What Happened and What’s Happening?

Throughout most of the 20th century, the Moon River of Eastern Georgian Bay enjoyed a sterling reputation as one of Ontario’s best walleye fisheries. That reputation began to tarnish with diminishing numbers throughout the 1970s. Hard times and low walleye abundance have continued to present-day with a sport fishery that is now a mere shadow of its former glory days. (This scenario is not unique to the Moon River. To varying degrees it is common along the eastern shore of Georgian Bay.)

Spawning population estimates by the Ministry of Natural Resources peg the Moon River walleye population at around 25 - 30,000 individuals in the late 1960s. Current estimates are only around 1 – 2,000.

What happened? The recently produced *Moon River Walleye Rehabilitation Plan*, co-authored by the Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council (EGBSC) and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR), lists a number of probable factors contributing to the decline:

- Non-sustainable harvest by the sport and commercial fisheries
- A spring-time flow regime often detrimental to walleye reproduction
- Environmental and aquatic ecosystem changes related to invasive species and burgeoning cormorant populations, and
- Limited spawning habitat.

No one factor is probably responsible for the decimation of the Moon River walleye population, but cumulatively their impact has been devastating.

The EGBSC and MNR are actively seeking supporters and partners to assist with their Moon River Walleye Rehabilitation Plan. Key action items in the plan include:

- A regulated flow regime consistent with the *Muskoka River Water Management Plan* that will be more

favourable to successful walleye reproduction

- Enhancement and expansion of walleye spawning habitat at Moon Falls
- Rehabilitation plantings of native-origin walleye
- A review of commercial and sport fishery harvest controls
- Increased enforcement effort, and
- Monitoring and assessment of population status and management actions.

The centrepiece of the Rehabilitation Plan is the extensive enhancement of walleye spawning habitat currently planned for the summer of 2008. This ambitious project calls for the enhancement/creation of up to 5000 square meters of high quality spawning habitat through the deposition of approximately 4400 cubic meters of spawning rubble and boulders. Three areas of enhancement are proposed at the Moon Falls spawning site.

The Rehabilitation Plan also espouses the expansion of walleye stocking efforts. The Moon River Walleye Association and EGBSC, through the Ministry’s *Community Fisheries and Wildlife Involvement Program* (CFWIP), have planted approximately 5.5 million fry and 4,000 summer fingerlings since the year 2000. The EGBSC will continue to stock fry and fingerlings raised at the Moon River CFWIP hatchery.

In 2003, sport fishing regulations were amended to significantly reduce the walleye harvest from the sport fishery. Commercial harvest is regulated by a quota system, originally implemented in the 1980s. Notwithstanding these laudable efforts, with the continuing dire straights the population finds itself in, the EGBSC is also advocating a review of current harvest controls.

The tenacity of the Moon River walleye population to withstand a multitude of stressors over the past century or more is truly impressive. The current spawning population still provides a sound basis with which to rehabilitate this fishery to its former glory. It's not too late.

If you would like to know more about the Moon River Walleye Rehabilitation Plan and the work of the Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council, please visit us at our website – www.helpourfisheries.com or contact Eric McIntyre, EGBSC Coordinator at Eric.McIntyre@Ontario.ca.



Bill McRobb, EGBSC member, with lunger female walleye spawned in the 2007 wild-egg collection / culture and stocking project to help rehabilitate the Moon River fishery.

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