



Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council

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Media Update – 2010-10

Walleye Restoration Project - Cognashene Area Of Eastern Georgian Bay

Remnant Musquash River walleye (female)
captured, sampled and released during the
2005 Index Spawners Survey



Restoration of walleye populations in south-eastern Georgian Bay has been a priority for the Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council (EGBSC) since its inception in 2006. Work in the form of spawning habitat enhancement, followed by rehabilitative plantings of summer fingerlings has been conducted at Tadenac Bay, Moon River and Go Home Bay. Next on the priority list for the EGBSC is the Cognashene area.

Historically – and even to this day, Georgian Bay walleye continue to spawn in the lower reaches of the Musquash River. This is the major river system in the Cognashene area of south-eastern Georgian Bay. Although little historical documentation exists on the size of spring walleye runs in the Musquash River, or the general abundance of walleye in the Cognashene area, anecdotal accounts and old photographs clearly suggest they were far more abundant in the early decades of the 1900s. Certainly, senior anglers in the area recall a high quality walleye fishery in Cognashene waters, especially near the Musquash River. Today's spawning run appears to be a small remnant of this earlier abundance.

In 2005, the Upper Great Lakes Management Unit (UGLMU) of the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) conducted a survey to assess the status of the spawning population. Only 25 walleye were captured from 32 net-nights of fishing effort; far below what would be expected of a healthy spawning population in this river.

The drastic reduction of the walleye spawning population in the Musquash River over the past century and more is perhaps not surprising. Negative impacts probably commenced in the late 1800s with the advent of the logging industry and the related construction of dams and mills to facilitate it. Early log drives on rivers were highly detrimental to walleye spawning activities ... among other ecological costs. The construction of up-stream dams and hydro-generating stations in the first half of the 20th century dramatically altered the flow regime in rivers throughout the Muskoka area including the Musquash River – especially during the sensitive spring-time walleye spawning period. In recent years, much higher flow velocities combined with low water levels on Georgian Bay have conspired to thwart walleye access to the historical spawning site at 3-Rock Chute, downstream of the Go Home Lake Dam.

In 2011, the EGBSC plan to conduct a detailed site analysis of various potential spawning locations in the lower reach of the Musquash River. This analysis will identify the 'best bet' for walleye spawning bed enhancement work – likely to be undertaken in 2012. This habitat enhancement work will be followed up with three to four years of rehabilitative walleye plantings to help seed the site with the nucleus of a future spawning population. This work has the intention of ultimately re-establishing a healthy, self-sustaining walleye population in the Cognashene area of Georgian Bay.

Fortuitously, this new habitat should also benefit lake sturgeon that have historically – and may even today use the lower Musquash River for spawning.

Because excessive fish harvest – both commercial and sport, played a major role in depleting walleye populations, we will need to be more conservation-minded in future harvest management. To help this walleye population rebuild, more fish will need to be released alive by anglers, especially large females critical to reproductive success. The EGBSC is confident the Cognashene community will embrace this stewardship opportunity to restore a vibrant and healthy heritage walleye population in their area.

Partial funding for the project has been received from the Canada-Ontario Agreement Respecting the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem (COA). Additional funding is currently being sought from private and corporate sponsors. There is also a need for individuals to assist with future stewardship of vital spawning habitat in the lower Musquash River.

For further information please contact Karl Schiefer, GBA Fish Committee and Cognashene Area representative on the EGBSC; or Eric McIntyre, coordinator of the EGBSC at (705)773-4218 or Eric.McIntyre@Ontario.ca.