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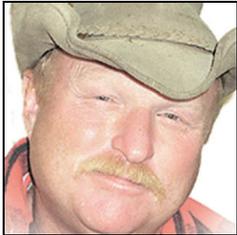
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Ted Peck: Rock River walleye fishing facing perfect storm

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BY TED PECK
Sunday, March 5, 2017

Rock Walleye Fishery Facing Perfect Storm//Ted Peck

Do you know the unofficial Wisconsin state cheer? It doesn't call for obscene action from Bucky Badger or the more benign "Go, Pack, Go." If you happen to be out on Rock River on this beautiful spring day or surfing social media, the cheer is loud and clear: "I got mine!"

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Several factors are rapidly coming together which will decimate the Rock River system's fledgling walleye fishery. There is no framework in place to avert this pending tragedy. Many folks who read this column regularly won't stand by and watch this train wreck—they will jump aboard the train, screaming the unofficial state cheer right up to the impending crash.

Why not? A major load-bearing beam in this matrix of destruction is May weather showing up two months early. Weather like this is meant for fishin'. We can't go after walleyes on most Wisconsin waters for two more months. But we sure can put a hurt on them now right out the back door in Rock River!

Most years we can't get out on the Rock until mid-March. When we do, it's in snowmobile suits for at least a couple of weeks. Today there are a pile of people out there wearing Packer hoodies with the sleeves pushed up.

We've been able to fish in relative comfort for two weeks already; the traditional spawning time is still four solid weeks away.

There are more “stupid” walleyes swimming in Rock River right now than any time I can remember in four decades of fishing this water. The 2013 year class of walleyes was HUGE, even by Trump standards. Fish of this year's class are now 15 inches long and fair game.

What we have here is the piscatory equivalent of statutory rape. There is a world of difference between the savvy and guile of an 18-inch walleye and greedy naïveté of a 15-inch fish.

The antiquated statewide bag limit of five 15-inch walleyes is still in effect on the Rock River system. This was outrageous enough back in the days when communication was telegraph-telephone-tell a fisherman.

Today's phones are not only mobile, they have cameras which take photos you don't even need to take to Walgreen's for development.

The photos can be shared with friends in real time, accompanied by snarky text messages: “Charlie! I got mine! Gold jig and a



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Posting these photos on social media has a geometric impact. News of a hot bite used to take days to leak out. Now it is instantaneous, with impact limited only by the time it takes to get to the river and launch a boat.

Most other popular fishing venues not subject to seasonal restrictions have more restrictive harvest guidelines in place. The slot limit which is in effect on the Wisconsin River saved that fishery when it was on the brink of destruction.

Ditto up on Fox River at DePere, where anglers have also been able to pound the walleyes several weeks earlier this year. If it weren't for the fish refuge below the DePere dam protecting walleyes at spawning time when they are most vulnerable, the unofficial state cheer would have faded from the Brown County hills years ago.

Walleye harvest guidelines are even more liberal over on the Mississippi River. There is undeniable negative impact from outrageous bag limits, social media and early spring weather along our western border, too. The only difference is water volume.

Anglers have a moth-to-candle attraction to tailwaters below dams on the Mississippi, but there are plenty of places for fish to hide downstream between the banks.

Not so on Rock River. Potential hotspots are both obvious and few. Mid-river can be reached in most places a long cast from either bank. Every walleye in Rock River will soon run a gauntlet peppered with hooks.

If female walleyes are protected and allowed to spawn, there is a good chance that a fishery will be self-sustaining. With significant supplemental stocking a fishery can thrive.

We are at the cusp of this kind of fishery right now on Rock River. Fifteen-inch walleyes have an androgynous appearance. An 18-inch walleye may have a paunch indicating she is full of eggs. But there is nothing stopping you from putting a knife to the belly and belting out the unofficial Wisconsin state cheer.

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Back in 1987, the Rock River system had a number of big walleyes. A pile of pigs lay on the Koshkonong ice that winter. I foolishly killed two 28-inchers myself and have regretted it ever since.

It has taken 30 years to get back to the point where the walleye fishing on the Rock is about to bust loose again. But I fear it's about to bust, period. The future of the fishery is literally in your hands.

Ted Peck, a certified Merchant Marine captain, is an outdoors columnist for The Gazette. Email him at tedpeck@acegroup.cc.

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