

Walleyes could be cause of high Rock River levels



TED PECK

My good friend Dave Dvorak once said if The Onion ever needed an outdoor writer I would be a good candidate for the job.

Fishermen aren't born liars, but we learn art of piscatory prevarication before most folks master simple compound words.

The key to any fish tale is to base the yarn on solid fact. Hydrologists say this is the highest Rock River levels have been in March for 29 years. That's a fact.

A serious explanation on the matrix of causes for the "beyond-no-wake world" anglers are living in out on the water quickly trigger frontal lobes of those

with fishin' on the brain to focus on finned fantasies instead of facts.

Perhaps the real reason the Rock is running so high and dirty this spring is driven by the incredible numbers of 15-inch walleyes now swimming in the Rock River and displaced water caused by boats loaded with fishers out there chasing them.

If this is indeed the case, river levels will recede quickly once the fleet fills far-too-liberal fivefish limits shouting the Wisconsin state cheer, "I got mine!" as they pull away from crowded boat ramps.

A major portion of

the walleye/sauger biomass now swimming in our back-door river is from the banner 2013 year class. These fish have grown to the 15-inch minimum "keeper" in effect on the Rock.

Fifteen-inch walleyes don't have the natural wariness of walleyes just a year or two older that have grown to a length of about 18 inches.

A 15-inch female walleye doesn't develop an obvious egg-laden belly like a 15-inch sauger cousin. At casual glance it's like trying to tell the difference between a nubbin buck and a yearling doe standing 80 yards away at dawn.

Like whitetails, removing a number of male walleyes from the fishery does not have significant impact on the population. But there could certainly be impact if an angler could not see an egg-laden belly and weigh the merits of selective harvest before throwing the fish in the livewell.

Over the past couple of months, there has been considerable outcry on social media calling for more restrictive harvest guidelines on the Rock River system. The passion of these basement-dwelling biologists is admirable, but in some cases, misguided.

Wisconsin DNR fisheries biologist Doug Lubke has worked with the Rock River fish population for years. In an interview late last week, Lubke shared his thoughts on more restrictive walleye/sauger harvest guidelines on this system.

"The establishment of a slot limit on Rock River has limited merit because recruitment numbers in year classes vary so greatly from year to year," Lubke said. "The slot limit works well on the Wisconsin River system because young-of-year production is much more predictable.

"However, recent past experience reveals that establishing a three-fish, 18-inch minimum walleye/sauger limit on Koshkonong and the Rock River system would likely have a substantial positive impact on the fishery over just a few years."

Lubke based this contention on data gleaned from 2011 when a blanket threefish/18-inch limit was tried across southern Wisconsin. The following year, public input at the Conversation Congress pushed the DNR to default back to the five-walleye/15-inch minimum keeper regulation.

There are several heavily pressured lakes in southeast Wisconsin where the threefish/18-inch limit has been in place for years that continue to be solid walleye producing venues.

Lubke said there is currently no proposal on changing Rock walleye limits on the agenda for DNR spring hearings scheduled statewide April 10.

He said, "The DNR would always entertain a resolution along these lines and could move quickly if this change was approved by the public through the Conservation Congress process."

Unfortunately, the "I got mine!" crowd favors the immediate gratification of numbers over substance. There is much more meat on three 18-inch walleyes than five 15-inch

fish, with a more obvious option to ponder selective harvest when handling an egg-laden female.

This won't change in a society where a supersize order of fries from Mickey D's takes precedence over a large, twice-baked Idaho spud with a dollop of sour cream and substantial garnish of bacon bits that requires a little more time—and a fork—to enjoy.

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