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Rock River walleyes will be available in record numbers, but at what future cost?

By Ted Peck Special to The Gazette Mar 18, 2018

Conditions are ripe for a perfect storm on Rock River system this year.

Water levels on Lake Koshkonong—the Rock’s walleye factory—are exceptionally low this spring.

These conditions will push many female walleyes, which might spawn in the lake, upstream to points beyond Blackhawk Island where they will attempt spawning in about three weeks.

The result will be a “big fish” spring like we haven’t seen on the Rock since 1987.

We haven’t seen a trophy walleye run like this in 30 years. I was there to reap the glory last time around—and I’ve felt shame and regret ever since.

Back in the winter and spring of 1987, I caught and killed six walleyes more than 28 inches on Koshkonong and the upper Rock River. There were so many big fish in the system then that most folks believed that the Rock had arrived as a premier walleye fishery and the dual-dorsaled bonanza would never end.

But this shameful overharvest, and the boiling hot summer of 1988, whacked the walleye population so hard that it has taken 30 years to recover. We wouldn’t have a walleye fishery here today if it weren’t for the tireless effort of retired DNR fisheries biologist Don Bush.

Thanks to the yeoman work of Bush and many volunteers, we’ve enjoyed great walleye fishing on the Rock for a decade now. The fishing has become incrementally better to the point where many believe we have a solid, sustainable population of Wisconsin’s most sought after fish.

But Rock River is no Lake Erie. It is just a medium-sized river. Either shore can be reached from midstream with a long cast.

Fish that will traverse the gauntlet upstream in the very near future can swim, but they can not hide.

Male walleyes in the Rock are already “on the chew”. Males are the vanguard of the annual spawning run.

Fishing pressure has been heavy for about 10 days now from Blackhawk Island upstream.

Folks who understand these fish and the easily revealed secrets of the Rock are having a field day. Fishing is great—and it’s only going to get better.

The spring walleye run on the Rock peaks about April 1.

I predict anglers will harvest more big walleyes from the system than we’ve seen since the spring of 1987.

Walleye bag limits on the Rock are far too liberal.

I'm no biologist, but I firmly believe the daily bag should be no more than three—as it is on many other heavy-pressured southern Wisconsin walleye fisheries.

The slot limit that has seen tremendous positive results on the Wisconsin River is another possible model that could sustain this fishery.

But these rules are not in play on the Rock River system this spring. If you get out there several times a week for the next several weeks, fishing smart and hard, you might very well catch the biggest Rock River walleye of your life.

If this happens you will literally hold the future of fishing in your hands. A couple of quick photos and a gentle release of a personal best “egg cannon” will stay with you a lifetime.

The six big, but not quite trophy walleyes, I took out of the Rock back in '87 has haunted me ever since.

The fact that we knew precious little about the concepts of “catch and release” and “selective harvest” back then is no excuse. We are all well versed in these philosophies now.

Let your conscience be your guide.

But know this: shouting the Wisconsin state cheer “I got mine!” across the water might have a sweet ring this spring.

But it may come back to haunt you next year or even decades later.

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