

-Eagle Lake Rehabilitation- Another Fix-It Project for the Popular Lake

The word biomanipulation can conjure all kinds of crazy thoughts these days with scientists cloning sheep and performing genetic experiments. However, biomanipulation is exactly what the DNR is looking to do in order to both improve the fishing and water clarity on Eagle Lake in Racine County.

Eagle Lake, which is a popular fishing destination for anglers throughout this area, was last put through a rehabilitation project back in 1991. At that time, the lake's fishery had become dominated by carp and bullheads, so the DNR poisoned off the lake to get rid of the less than desirable species. The lake was restocked with fish and reopened for fishing a couple years later.

By the middle 90's people were having great success catching large gamefish and panfish. Anglers flocked to Eagle to enjoy the resource while recreational users such as skiers and swimmers enjoyed the improved water clarity.

Typical scene on a Saturday morning at the Eagle Lake boat launch



However, the last number of years has seen the fishery go downhill. Anglers and DNR fish surveys showed that the panfish, while extremely abundant, were very small. There were still decent numbers of larger bass, but young bass were not as prevalent and the catch rates for pike have plummeted. At the same time, the water has become full of algae blooms and the

clarity has declined greatly, causing much consternation for the recreational users and those with property along the lake.

One of the main causes for the turbid water is there are just too many small panfish in the lake and not enough large predators to keep them in check. Zooplankton, which normally feed heavily on algae, are being gobbled up in large quantities by the small panfish. The result is that there are too much algae, which in turn cause the algae blooms and reduces water clarity. Compounding the issue is the overabundance of vegetation in the lake,

especially Eurasian Milfoil. The dense vegetation contributes to the problem by limiting the effectiveness of bass and pike from feeding on the panfish.

To combat the problem, the DNR is proposing a multi-pronged attack of which biomanipulation is a center piece.

“Fishery science is a lot more complicated than it used to be. We have found that we can improve the health of the fishery, water quality and aquatic plant species through manipulating the predator/prey relationship”; said Doug Welch the Senior Fisheries Biologist for our area.

To this end, the DNR has proposed that the bass minimum size limit would be 22 inches and northern pike size limit would be 40 inches. The panfish limit would be 8 inches with the daily bag being reduced to 10 fish.

By protecting the large predator fish from over harvest by anglers, the DNR expects that the large gamefish will keep the number of panfish in check thus allowing the zooplankton to consume large quantities of algae.

The fish regulation changes were proposed at the DNR Spring Hearings held April 16th. Overall, the proposals passed in the region and Welch expects the Natural Resources board to approve the regulation changes as well. The new regulations are expected to go into effect next spring.

“This project would not have been able to move forward without the approval of the outdoors public at the hearings”; said Welch

The other important prongs in the attack are more restrictive boating ordinances and expansion of no-wake zones in an effort to better protect shallow weedbeds. Also, there is an expectation that changes in allowed lawn fertilizers and watershed improvements will help reduce the amount of nutrients flowing into the lake.

The project already began this spring with the DNR netting 100 to 200 gamefish out of the lake and moving them to holding ponds in Bong Recreational Area. More fish will be netted this fall.

Welch expects that current bag limits will be lifted in May to allow anglers to harvest as many fish as possible. That is because in the late fall, the chemical rotenone will be applied to kill off the remaining fish.

In spring 2008 the water will be chemically treated to remove exotic milfoil that is choking off the desirable vegetation. Fish will then be restocked back into the lake including those from the holding ponds. With the expanded size limits, the lake will be allowed to open for fishing in 2008. Further fish stockings will likely occur in following years to supplement the fish population.

A more detailed explanation of biomanipulation and the Eagle Lake project can be found at www.eaglelake-racinecounty.org/management_plan.htm

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The DNR suspended the planned poisoning and many of the rehab activities due to concerns over VHS, the fish virus found in the Great Lakes and now Lake Winnebago. The DNR has to recertify all of the hatcheries and there was concern there would not be enough fish to restock the lake. It is expected the plan will move forward in 2008 with the poisoning planned in the fall of that year. It is expected the open fish regulations will be implemented in spring 2008.

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