



TIDAL YELLOW PERCH MANAGEMENT AND THE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN

By Paul Piavis

February is a time when many sport and commercial fishermen turn their attention to one of the most colorful and delicious fish we have in the state - yellow perch. Yellow perch begin schooling-up during the cold winter months in preparation for their upstream migration to spawn during early March. It is at this time when most yellow perch are harvested by sport and commercial fishermen in tidal waters of the state.

For DNR Fisheries Service biologists, yellow perch management has become a twelve month-a-year pursuit. Some of our activities include monitoring the adult populations in the late winter and spring, hatching and rearing yellow perch for stock

enhancement during the spring and summer, assessing the spawn with juvenile collections during the summer, documenting juvenile habitat conditions in late summer, and analyzing data and preparing reports during the winter. Add all of those directed activities to the various ecosystem studies and multispecies surveys such as the upper Bay trawl survey (December - February) and you can see the manpower commitment Fisheries Service has made to understanding and managing yellow perch.

THE NEED FOR THE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN

Yellow perch harvest was drastically regulated in the late 1980s in response to declining population levels. Some systems were completely closed to harvest, the minimum size limit was raised to 8 ½ inches for commercial take and commercial yellow perch fishing was prohibited statewide in February. Recreational fishermen were regulated to a five fish daily creel limit. A small yellow perch hatchery operated from 1988 through 1992. As populations rebounded in the late 1990s, some regulations were relaxed, and strictly regulated commercial fisheries were reopened in the Chester and Patuxent Rivers. An updated stock assessment and a reevaluation of the regulations were produced for the 2000 fishing season. Analysis indicated that restricting the commercial harvest to a maximum size of 11 inches afforded good protection of the spawning stock from overfishing. With fundamental shifts in management and improved yellow perch stock status it became obvious that a new Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) was needed for tidal yellow perch.

THE PROCESS

The first step was to contact sport fishermen, commercial fishermen, and local watershed conservation organizations. Members from these groups dedicated their time to form an ad hoc yellow perch workgroup to participate in the yellow perch management discussions. In addition, Maryland's Sport Fish Advisory Committee (recreational interests) and Tidal Fish Advisory Committee (commercial interests) gave input to the process and have been kept abreast of any developments.

Once the workgroups met and provided guidance, Fisheries Service personnel began updating stock assessments and compiling the most current research and statistics for yellow perch. This process is what differentiates the yellow perch FMP from many of the current FMPs. The yellow perch FMP will be perhaps the most synoptic of Maryland's FMPs. This is important because, in one document, user groups will have a single reference which has historic data and regulations along with detailed explanations of the current assessments and management goals. By listing our goals and objectives, the management framework (what DNR will do under a certain set of conditions relating to the stock and the fisheries) will provide a clear process for managing yellow perch.

Goals and objectives for other important segments of yellow perch management are also addressed. In the original work group meetings, it was apparent that all user groups identified habitat degradation as having the most significant impact on yellow perch populations. The FMP addresses issues such as areas where low dissolved oxygen conditions impact yellow perch populations. In areas where yellow perch have not rebounded, existing stocks may be supplemented with hatchery reared yellow perch.

WHERE IS THE PROCESS NOW?

Obviously, this amount of interest from fishermen, the large amount of field studies, data analyses and data compilation, along with cooperation and coordination from many groups within DNR makes for a challenging task of putting the FMP together. The process has been slower than most would like. All of the latest assessments, management framework, and objectives are completed. At this point, a draft FMP containing specific actions is nearing completion. Another round of comments will be solicited from the workgroups and advisory panels, and necessary revisions will be incorporated into the document. When this phase of the process ends, we will have a framework for managing yellow perch that is transparent and adaptable. Ideally, it will spell out what management options DNR will take given certain stock conditions and harvest levels, and offer remedial measures for areas where yellow perch stocks remain depressed.