A New Ecological Framework for Recreational Fisheries Management in Ontario

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Ontario is responsible for managing a large and diverse aquatic resource. The province manages 24% of Canada's freshwater, including 40% of the Great Lakes. There are over 250,000 lakes in Ontario and countless kilometres of rivers and streams. Ontario has approximately 20% of the world's supply of lake trout lakes (~2,000) and more than 3,500 walleye lakes.

Even with this abundant resource, Ontario’s fisheries are in high demand. Fish are important economically, supporting the sport fishing and tourist industries, as well as the commercial fishery. About 1.4 million anglers fish in Ontario each year and spend over $2.3 billion dollars annually on fisheries-related expenditures.

Our goal is to maintain healthy fish communities in the thousands of lakes, rivers and streams to ensure present and future generations can enjoy high quality fishing opportunities.

**Historical Context**

Fisheries management over the past few decades has generally focused on managing lakes on an individual basis. This approach fails to recognize the mobility of anglers that generally shifts fishing pressure to adjacent lakes when new regulations are implemented. The result is overly complex fishing regulations.

Currently, Ontario’s recreational fishing regulation summary is almost 100 pages long. There are 37 Fishing Divisions, different seasons and catch limits for 18 fish species and thousands of exceptions to the general rules for individual lakes.

The current focus on individual lakes is a costly and ineffective way of managing the resource. Due to the high cost of managing individual lakes, this approach does not adequately consider sustainability and other resource management concerns for the vast majority of waterbodies in the province.

With the myriad of exceptions based on individual lakes, the fishing summary is increasingly harder to understand and the regulations are difficult to interpret and enforce. In some cases, the complexity may even be a barrier for people to get out and fish - particularly for young people or those for whom English is their second language.

There is a real need to shift from individual lake management to a system that functions on a broader scale.

**New Ecological Framework for Recreational Fisheries Management**

Ontario is developing a new ecological framework for recreational fisheries management focusing on **new ecological Fisheries Management Zones**, managing and monitoring at the broader landscape level, and enhanced stewardship. Modernizing fishing regulations will make them easier to understand.

The 2005-2006 issue of the Ontario Fishing Regulation Summary is valid for a 2-year period while the Ministry of Natural Resources works to improve and modernize the fishing regulations.
Fisheries Management Zones (FMZs) (currently called Divisions) are the geographic basis for setting fishing regulations such as catch limits and seasons. When the Divisions were first established they were intended to be areas where fishing regulations could be applied over a large area. It was recognized that the lakes, fish species and fishing pressure were similar in Divisions and thus would respond to management in a similar way.

During the past few decades, several new Fishing Divisions were created to set regulations to control exploitation for a variety of species. Many Divisions were formed using road networks, township or county boundaries, or simply, lines of latitude and longitude. Since then, there has been a proliferation of individual lake fishing exception regulations across Ontario because the Division wide regulations were not adequate to control exploitation on all lakes. A number of individual lake Fishing Divisions on some larger lakes were also created to address conservation issues on these lakes.

A complete review of recreational fishing divisions is underway, with the purpose of reducing their number, rationalizing boundaries and making the boundaries easier to define on the ground.

For example, here are some of the considerations that we used to develop new Fisheries Management Zones for northwestern Ontario:

The new boundaries will be based on ecological factors and angler use patterns. This means looking at a whole range of considerations, such as the province's climate zones, watersheds, fishing pressure, and our road networks.

In addition to reducing the number of zones, we want to ensure that the boundaries are easier to define on the ground. That will make life easier for anglers - and for our Conservation Officers who have to enforce the rules. MNR will produce accurate detailed maps to better define the boundaries for the new Fisheries Management Zones.

Development of the new Fisheries Management Zones provides an excellent opportunity to examine the need for existing regulations and exceptions, remove redundancies or make the wording of regulations and exceptions more clear and understandable.
The existing Fishing Divisions and the proposed new Fisheries Management Zones are shown on adjacent maps.

The total number of Fisheries Management Zones has been reduced to 20. The numbering sequence has been standardized and the new zones are a combination of some old division boundaries and new boundaries. The Fisheries Management Zones will become the unit of management for the majority of lakes so that fish populations are monitored, assessed and regulated at the zone level.

The regulations will be simpler and it will be easier to identify where the boundaries are for the Fisheries Management Zones. Map products will be available that will allow MNR staff and anglers to readily see where the boundary is.

In some areas, the change in boundaries and the implementation of fish species "tool kits" to standardize regulations, may result in changes in fishing seasons and size limits. Public consultation will occur wherever significant changes are proposed. The new Fisheries Management Zones are scheduled to be in place for the 2007 fishing summary.
State of the Resource Reporting & Enhanced Stewardship

State of the Resource Reporting

The proliferation of special regulations in the last few decades is in itself a sign that fisheries are in trouble. Fisheries managers have struggled to address this decline, generally on a lake by lake basis as issues are identified. The cost of monitoring and enforcing "unique" solutions on individual lakes has become prohibitive.

In recent years there has been greater public awareness of, and concern about, the health of our natural environment and ecosystems. The public expects resource information and resource status reports that are readily available and understood.

There is a need to manage for the long-term and to monitor the fisheries resource at a landscape level, not on individual lakes. The need for action must also be based on the state of the fisheries resource and not on a single lake.

By undertaking fisheries assessment at a broad, landscape level, we will be better positioned to meet this need. Putting in place ecologically based Fisheries Management Zones will allow us to report on the state of the fisheries resource across Ontario - something that we can’t really do right now. There will be some key lakes such as Lake Nipissing, Lake of the Woods and Lake Simcoe, that will continue to be managed on an individual basis.

MNR biologists have developed techniques that will allow us to monitor the fisheries resource based on the new Fisheries Management Zones. Details of this program should be available within the next several months.

Enhanced Stewardship

Stewardship of the resource is a key component of fisheries management. A new stewardship model that will support the proposed landscape level approach and the new Fisheries Management Zones is being developed. While details have not yet been worked out, the MNR will be encouraging more public involvement in fisheries management with a wide range of stakeholders.

Summary

The objectives for this initiative:

❖ Fishing regulations that are more user-friendly
❖ A management approach that focuses on the state of the resource in ecological zones, not just individual lakes
❖ More public involvement through an enhanced stewardship approach

MNR plans to make significant progress by January 1, 2007 and the effort will be largely completed by January of 2008.

Comments Welcome

MNR is welcoming any comments you may have on the new Fisheries Management Zones. The proposed new Fisheries Management Zones will be posted on the Environmental Bill of Rights Registry for 45 days for public comment. To view the proposal notice, visit: www.ene.gov.on.ca/samples/search/Ebrquery_REG.htm and enter EBR Registry Number RB05E6005. Dates for public input: February 18 - April 4, 2005.

Contact

Fisheries Section
Ministry of Natural Resources
300 Water St., Peterborough
K9J 8M5
Fax: (705) 755-1957