



Flathead Catfish Regulation Proposal

Lake Winnebago System - 2007

Background

Flathead catfish represent one of the most important recreational and predator sport fish in the Winnebago System. It is a long-lived species that takes many years to reach trophy/quality size. Age and growth analysis has estimated these fish can live as long as 30+ years and are capable of attaining weights in excess of 60 pounds. Due to their long life span these fish populations may be particularly sensitive to angling pressure and harvest. In the Winnebago System, flathead catfish angling effort is directed by a combination of conventional rod and reel gear, setlines, and bankpoles. In the Wolf River, recent surveys of setline and bankpole effort indicate fishing pressure has remained at relatively high levels. Several measures have been taken to reduce exploitation including a ban on commercial fishing and lowering of daily bag limits in 2002. However, exploitation rates have still remained high, often reaching 33% or more of the quality to trophy size stock. Other concerns include the potential over harvest and/or snagging of flatheads during the late fall and winter. Anglers have voiced concern over declining flathead catfish numbers and size and have worked together with the department to formulate several management options to improve the quality of the fishery. The following document explains the proposed rule changes.

What is the proposal?

- *Implementation of a 30-36 inch harvest slot limit on flathead or one over 42 inches with a daily bag limit of 1 (possession limit of 2) for setline/bankpole anglers and general anglers.*
- *For general anglers, establish a harvest season for flatheads that would open on the first Saturday of May and close on September 30 of each year (catch and release would apply the rest of the year). The current setline/bankpole season would remain the same.*

Why a harvest slot?

One of the major concerns expressed by anglers was a desire to improve the density of larger trophy sized flatheads. This regulation would ensure protection of both young and old spawning stock. This is especially important considering these fish can live up to 30+ years of age and some of the larger females are capable of producing massive numbers of eggs. Population modeling based on spawning age, growth, and mortality estimates show that this harvest slot would provide adequate protection to improve overall population abundance, recruitment, and trophy potential for Winnebago System flatheads.

Would a reduced bag limit be good enough?

The proposed bag limit reduction to one fish may not be enough protection since angling pressure is extremely high. Angler questionnaire reports and setline/bankpole counts indicate angler effort at relatively high levels. In 2007, a setline and bankpole boat survey of the Wolf River showed 192 bankpoles and 86 setlines (roughly 2.4 setline/bankpoles per river mile). At peak fishing effort (all hooks baited on a setline or bankpole) this equates to almost 60,816 hours of hook effort on a daily basis (the same as 845 general rod/reel anglers fishing with 3 lines for 24 hours). Based on current bankpole and setline counts and questionnaire reports of numbers of days fished per angler (mean days = 29 per angler) we estimate annual effort may be as high as 1,763,664 hook hours per year. Most likely this effort estimate could be slightly inflated due to the fact that not all setline anglers bait all hooks on a line. However, even if an angler only baited half their hooks effort would still be very high.

Why not eliminate setlines and bankpoles?

The use of setlines and bankpoles is a very traditional fishery on the Winnebago System. Many setline and bankpole anglers have shown a strong desire to conserve the flathead fishery and over the past few years have worked with the department to collect flathead population data and develop more stringent harvest regulations to preserve this method of angling. Also, some setline/bankpole anglers target channel catfish which appear to be at adequate population levels.

Why is this regulation needed on the Fox River?

The Fox River does not appear to be experiencing the same amount of pressure and exploitation as the Wolf River. However, the Fox River could be an up and coming fishery and it is felt that the proposed regulations should maintain the fishery in its current state. Also, regulations would be consistent within the Winnebago System.

Why is a general fishing season needed?

Currently, the flathead catfish season for general anglers is continuous. Information collected from radio telemetry tracking studies show flatheads have strong tendencies to congregate in large numbers and in select locations during over-winter periods (September – March). During the early and late phases of these periods they can be particularly susceptible to angling pressure and overexploitation since these fish do not move far from their over-winter habitat. In addition, during mid-winter coldwater periods the fish become very inactive and are easily snagged. The department has received several reports of anglers snagging catfish in both the Fox and Wolf Rivers. Having a closed harvest season during this period will ensure these fish are adequately protected during a vulnerable stage of their life history.

If you have any questions – please contact:

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