

Baptiste Lake Plan Implementation – Fishing Derbies

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One of the recommendations in the Baptiste Lake Plan is to consider the economic and environmental impact of competitive fishing events (tournaments and derbies) on the lake, and to make recommendations if and as appropriate. This brief report addresses the matter.

Background

Competitive fishing is a popular form of recreation on many lakes in Ontario and elsewhere. Some are large tournaments — often part of a summer “circuit” of several lakes — and attract professional or semi-professional anglers. These events, almost all of which practise catch-and-release, often charge substantial entry fees, have corporate sponsors, and offer significant prizes (sometimes including boats and motors).

The vast majority of competitive fishing events, however, are smaller tournaments (often labeled as 'derbies'), which are also mostly catch-and-release events organized by communities, businesses or fishing clubs for the benefit of local recreational fishermen. This type of event is characterized by low entry fees and modest prizes.

Every five years, the MNR conducts a survey of the number of competitive fishing events in Ontario. The surveys show a marked increase in the popularity and frequency of such events. For example, in the 1989 survey, there were only about 100 competitive fishing events in Ontario. By 1999, that number had risen to 518. In 2004, there were 680 events, and the 2008 MNR survey showed an increase to 1,039, making Ontario one of the most popular jurisdictions in all of North America for competitive fishing events.

In years past, Baptiste Lake has hosted competitive fishing events primarily of the smaller variety. They have invariably been small catch-and-release bass tournaments and have been organized by local groups or a group in Peterborough and hosted at Lakeview Lodge or Grant’s Store (now Country Fare). The local fire department was sometimes associated with these events (1993-95), and received a part of the proceeds for their own use or to support a local charity that they championed. In the last few years, the Baptiste Lake Marina has organized an annual “pike derby” for children in conjunction with the Bancroft Fish and Game Club.

Elephant Lake Lodge continues to host successful fishing derbies. In 2011, they organized two pike tournaments. The one in May had a \$60 registration fee, and attracted about 35 teams with bass boats and live wells. There were money prizes and trophies. The one in August attracted about 25 kids and had prizes donated by local stores (including Canadian Tire). Fish caught included pike, perch, and rock bass. Fish were to be brought in live to the weigh-in, but – for the kids -- the rules regarding “live wells” were pretty loosely enforced.

In addition to these two pike tournaments, Elephant Lake Lodge also played host to a bass tournament organized by the Harcourt Recreation Hall in July 2011. This was a larger tournament. It attracted about 85 teams this year. The entry fee was \$100 and there were monetary prizes. Part of the proceeds went to the Harcourt Recreation Hall. Some of the anglers from these Elephant Lake events do make their way into Baptiste Lake to fish.

The large, “professional” events – with their greater numbers of fishermen and more powerful boats – raise issues quite different from those posed by the smaller events that have taken place on Baptiste Lake. It is with those smaller events that this report is concerned.

Economic Impacts

On the basis of discussions with several local businesses – Baptiste Lake Marina, Birchcliff Lodge, Country Fare, Elephant Lake Lodge – it can be concluded that recent fishing derbies have no discernible economic impact, either positive or negative.

The fishermen who participate in our derbies typically come with their tanks full of fuel, so there’s no business for the local marina. For Baptiste Lake events, they generally put their boats in the water at the public dock or (illegally) at the Mud Bay causeway, and park in the free lot above Country Fare or at the side of the road (again, no business for the marina). They generally pack a sandwich lunch – once the tournament is underway, the fishermen are prohibited from touching land – so generate no business for local establishments that might provide sandwiches. And when the tournament is over in the late afternoon, they typically pull their boats out of the water and head home immediately.

These features, common to the small tournaments that we see on our lake, do not characterize the larger, professional events. Indeed, in large tournaments with big prizes, it is not uncommon for fishermen to “pre-fish” the lake, spending days on the water prior to the tournament to familiarize themselves with the water and probable fish locations. In those cases, the fishermen often stay at a local motel, and stimulate the local economy with gas purchases, food, lodging, etc. In that case, the local economic impact can be significant.

Even in the case of Elephant Lake Lodge and the small tournaments it organizes or hosts, the economic impact is minimal. In the case of the Harcourt bass tournament in July, of the 85 teams registered, only 3 stayed overnight at the Lodge and they prepared their own food in their cabins.

It is unlikely that Baptiste Lake would become a popular location for the big derbies. Experienced bass fishermen have noted the bass fishing in Baptiste has been spotty over the past few summers, and the field of competitive fishing tournaments is already quite crowded with large events on other lakes. An attempt by Country Fare a few years ago to

organize a local tournament with a \$100 entry fee and a top prize of \$1500 (intended to raise money for a local community organization) failed to attract enough interest to warrant the expense and effort – simply because the competition from established tournaments was too great.

One businessman made the point that there might be more local economic benefit if derbies could be held in the spring or early fall, to help extend the season beyond the summer peak period. There would obviously be obstacles – not the least of which is that the bass season in much of Ontario, including Baptiste Lake, doesn't open until the fourth Saturday in June. The pike season, though, opens on the Saturday of the May long weekend.

Ecological Impacts

Some people have expressed concern about the environmental impacts of fishing tournaments, particularly on the fish population. Again, the impacts of large, professional events are probably different from those of the smaller events that are typical on Baptiste Lake.

The large tournaments generally attract highly skilled fishermen with big boats equipped with state-of-the-art live wells. And the rules for the catching, handling, and releasing of fish are stringent and strictly enforced. In those circumstances, it can be argued that the impact on the fish population – while there will be some instances of dislocation and mortality – will be minimal. Indeed, during large professional tournaments, dead fish result in a deduction of points; the fish, therefore, are handled very carefully from their catch to the weigh-in and ultimate release.

In the case of the smaller events, fishermen may be less skilled at using proper hooking, fighting and fish handling techniques, and their boats may be equipped with lower-quality live wells that do not care for the fish as well as high quality live wells. Studies have shown that there is always some level of fish mortality during catch-and-release tournaments. (Mortality can range from less than 1% to 94%, depending on a number of factors.) One factor that affects the chance of survival for caught fish is water temperature. As the water temperature rises, so does mortality amongst released fish because of decreased dissolved oxygen levels. (Studies have shown that mortality of largemouth bass in catch-and-release tournaments is 10%, 24%, and 40% in water temperatures of 15C, 25C, and 30C respectively.)

Other factors that can improve the survival rate of angled fish include: boating the fish quickly and not “drawing out the fight,” keeping exposure to air at an absolute minimum, handling the fish as little as possible, being careful not to remove the protective mucus coating the fish's skin, and using artificial bait as opposed to live bait, which increases mortality because of usually deeper-seated hook-sets.

Other ecological concerns vis-a-vis competitive fishing events include the possible displacement of the fish population following a tournament and over-fishing, but the

latter is a greater concern for lakes south of Baptiste that, in some cases, host dozens of large-scale tournaments every summer. (In 2008, 50 tournaments were held on Lake Simcoe, 40 on Rice Lake, 18 on Lake Scugog, and 13 in the Tri-Lakes of Pigeon, Buckhorn, and Chemong.)

As for the displacement of the fish population following a tournament, studies have shown that smallmouth bass have a very strong home range and are likely to return to it after being released elsewhere. Largemouth bass are less likely to return to their home range, and will not do so if released more than 8 km from where they were caught. Also, the release site can be targeted by anglers following the tournament, which can increase mortality rates of released fish.

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, the province's largest non-profit conservation organization, has sanctioned certain competitive fishing events for several years, provided organizers meet conservation and safety criteria. Among other things, the OFAH sanctioning criteria limit the number of boats per tournament depending on the size of the lake, and require proper catch and handling techniques.

As for the MNR, the government's view on competitive fishing events is guided by a policy developed in 1984. The MNR takes a neutral stance towards competitive fishing events, but recommends live-release tournaments. In the mid 1990s, efforts to revise the policy, including a province-wide registry of all competitive fishing events, were scuttled for political and financial reasons.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. It is concluded that bass tournaments on Baptiste Lake – of the nature, number, and size of those that have been held over the last few years – have no significant economic or environmental impact, either positive or negative. Particularly given the passions that can arise on either side of the issue, and the fact that the MNR takes a neutral stance towards competitive fishing events, it is neither necessary nor advisable at this time for the Lake Association or the municipality of Hastings Highlands to take a position, pro or con. A continuing “watching brief” is recommended.
2. The Lake Association may want to consider putting its support behind the “pike derby” that the Baptiste Lake Marina has organized, with modest success, for the last four years with the Bancroft Fish and Game Club. The Association could help to promote that event, which provides a fun outing for children. The BLA’s active promotion and support would help create a more successful tournament, would increase the Association’s profile, and would demonstrate yet another way in which it provides service to lake residents. The Paudash Lake Association has sponsored a very successful children’s “rock bass” derby for many years as one of their featured annual events.

References:

- Kerr, S. J. [ed.]. 1999. Competitive Fishing in Ontario Workshop Proceedings, Workshop Proceedings WP-O1, Southcentral Sciences Section, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Kemptville, Ontario. 107 p.

- Kerr, S. J. 2009. A survey of 2008 competitive fishing events in Ontario. Fish and Wildlife Branch. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Peterborough, Ontario. 9 p. + appendices.

Appendix:

MNR Guidelines for the Live - Release of Tournament Fish

The merits of live release programs and the survival of tournament fish vary tremendously between species and tournaments, depending upon numerous factors which influence fish mortality. The following guidelines are intended to minimize fish mortality, both immediate and latent, in live-release tournaments. The Ministry cautions that the actual success of live release efforts for most species has not been well documented. Live release is proposed in this policy only as a possible mean of reducing harvest and returning large individuals, which are limited in number, back to the fishery. Live release of tournament fish should not be considered a satisfactory solution to offset the harvest effects of a tournament on an already stressed community.

- 1.** Live-release tournaments should be scheduled so as to avoid extremes in air and water temperatures. Cool temperatures are most favourable for fish survival.
- 2.** Handling of fish must be absolutely minimized. For this reason, immediate release, where the measurements are taken without removing the fish from the water, is the most desirable type of live release. Immediate release is particularly advisable for large fish such as muskellunge.
- 3.** Where fish are to be held for subsequent release, an aerated live well with bilge pump is essential both in contestants' boats and at the weigh-in station. It should be kept covered and the water changed frequently using water from the lake being fished. The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters provides plans for simple construction of a portable live well.
- 4.** Only those fish which can be expected to survive should be returned to the water. Fish hooked in the eyes or gills or damaged in either place should be kept. Fish must not be held at the eyes or gills. Landing nets should be used where possible. Care must be taken not to remove the fish's protective body mucus.
- 5.** Fish should be released as close to the general location of capture as possible.
- 6.** The length of fishing day should be kept short as mortality rates generally increase the longer the fish are confined.

7. Angling methods should be encouraged that will minimize hook damage to the fish (e.g. the use of single, barbless hooks) where possible. To reduce the likelihood of fish swallowing the hook, no live, preserved or prepared bait should be used.

Reference for appendix material:

- Thomas, Evan, "Ontario's Policy on Competitive Fishing Events" in Kerr, S. J. [ed.]. 1999. Competitive Fishing in Ontario Workshop Proceedings, Workshop Proceedings WP-O1, Southcentral Sciences Section, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Kemptville, Ontario. 107 p.