

Yellow Perch Fishing on Lake Erie

by Charles Murray



photo-Art Michaels



photo-WCO Thomas A. Nunamacher

I saw a catchy name on a boat while I was working on Lake Erie—Perch Snatcher. It demonstrates how prominent perch fishing has become on Lake Erie in the last decade. I have seen boats named Walleye Wizard and Chasin Steel, but other than the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's research vessel Perca (the scientific name for yellow perch), I have never seen a boat with a perch moniker, especially an angling boat.



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Since 2000, the number of angler trips for yellow perch on Pennsylvania's portion of Lake Erie has averaged over 41,000 annually, and about half of all fishing trips on the lake are for yellow perch. For the first time in decades, head boats are back on the big lake.

When I started with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's Lake Erie Research Unit in 1993, yellow perch abundance was at its lowest level during what would be considered the modern era of fisheries management on Lake Erie. In the Pennsylvania waters of Lake Erie, there was no commercial fishery for perch. Other than a few local die hards, there was very little interest in yellow perch among anglers as well. During that time, anglers targeting walleyes dominated our fishery. Yellow perch only attracted about five percent of total open lake boat angler effort.

Things started to change in the new millennium. As the perch population rebounded and grew, we saw angler interest take off. Since 2000, the number of angler trips for yellow perch on Pennsylvania's portion of Lake Erie has averaged over 41,000 annually, and about half of all fishing trips on the lake are for yellow perch. Local entrepreneurs took notice too. For the first time in decades, we saw head boats back on the big lake. Head boats are vessels that take out large numbers of anglers and charge per head. The last time we saw head boats in Erie was when blue pike were the preeminent species in Lake Erie.

photo-Art Michaels

Recruitment is the key element to a fishery that relies on natural reproduction to sustain itself. The forces of nature have provided very good spawning success in recent years, which has resulted in exponential increases in perch abundance. Another thing that has changed since the early 1990s is improvements in our management of perch. We share this resource with our Lake Erie partners in Ohio, New York, Michigan and Ontario, Canada. Through rigorous assessment programs coordinated through the Lake Erie Yellow Perch Task Group, we are able to establish safe harvest limits that promote sustainable fisheries. Each spring, the Lake Erie Committee allocates a share or quota of perch to each jurisdiction, which must strictly adhere to these limits. Each agency stays under their respective quotas by implementing creel limits on their recreational fisheries and harvest restrictions on their commercial fisheries.

Currently, some of the best perch fishing in Lake Erie is in the east-central basin, which includes the Pennsylvania portion of Lake Erie. You don't need high tech gear or have to invest a fortune in fuel to fill up the coolers. A sea-worthy boat is a must for Lake Erie. Beyond that, simply locate fish on the fish finder or look for the armada of other perch boats ("the perch pack"), and join in on the fun.

In addition to an abundance of perch, we also have plenty of large perch in our local population. Anglers refer to these larger perch as jumbos, and they are the preferred quarry among perch anglers. Perch fishing on Lake Erie is what anglers refer to as a meat fishery. About 90 percent of the perch caught are kept to eat. Their delectable flavor and ease with which they can be caught makes them very popular.

In regard to this issue, I would like to make an appeal to the perch angler's conservation ethic. Don't feel guilty for taking your daily limit. However, be aware that due to the effects of sudden decompression, mortality of perch caught and released from deep water is essentially 100



Photo: Art Michaels

percent. If you are catching a lot of small fish in one location and want larger fish, move to another spot and attempt to locate bigger fish. It is important to note that if you release a perch and it dies, it is considered part of your creel limit. If a Waterways Conservation Officer witnesses you catching and releasing perch, you can be cited for exceeding the daily creel limit, regardless if you harvest them or not. See your *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary* for more regulations including seasons, sizes, creel limits and how to release fish. ☐