

INSTITUTE FOR FISHERIES RESEARCH
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ALBERT S. HAZZARD, PH.D.
DIRECTOR

ADDRESS
UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS ANNEX
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

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THE TROUT CREEL LIMIT--SHOULD IT BE LOWERED?*

by

Albert S. Hazzard

During recent years Michigan trout fishermen have debated the present daily limit of "15 trout but not more than 10 pounds and 1 fish" and most seem to agree that it is too high. The question might be raised as to just what is a satisfactory number to be set by the Legislature since it is that body, not the Conservation Department, which specifies the limits on fish catches except on two lakes (Lake Charlevoix and Birch Lake, Cass County) where by Commission order five trout make up the daily bag.

All are agreed on certain principles. The limit should be as generous as the annual production of fish will permit. It should be fair to all anglers and should not favor a few who are lucky enough and hungry enough to take the maximum allowed by the law if at the expense of the rest. The limit should also be attainable--not every day of course, but on at least a few good days during the season by a reasonably skillful angler. Does our present limit qualify in these respects?

There was no limit to the take in the "good old days" in Michigan, which was proper as the supply was more than adequate for the few who fished. Late in the 19th century a limit of fifty was imposed, which was reduced

* Facts upon which this article is based are largely from published and unpublished reports of Dr. David S. Shetter, now Biologist in Charge of the Hunt Creek Fisheries Experiment Station. Louis Krumholz supervised the collection and compilation of most of the creel census data on small "made" trout lakes.

to thirty-five and then twenty-five and finally fifteen. These later reductions came with increased angling, particularly with the advent of the automobile and good roads.

Other states have been faced with the same problem, even those in the far West and in northern New England. In the wilder places in both of these sections the angling pressure is less than in Michigan. Montana has recently reduced the daily take to 15 game fish including trout. Wyoming permits 20 game fish per day, Colorado 20 trout, Maine 25, Vermont 20, New York and Pennsylvania 10. Our neighboring states of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Indiana allow 15 trout for the day's catch. In Ohio and Illinois, where trout water is scarce, the limit is 6 and 8 respectively. In most of these states, as in Michigan, there is also a maximum daily poundage regardless of number and in some, fishing is restricted to the use of artificial flies and to even lower catches on certain waters. The trend in all progressive trout states has been toward lower daily limits, thereby placing the emphasis on the sport value rather than the meat value of trout.

Michigan's average trout season is approximately 130 days. It would be theoretically possible for an angler to legally take 1,950 trout in the course of the season. No one ever approaches that figure although records of three and even four hundred trout per season have been reported. The local expert who can watch conditions of weather and water and who is able to go when these are right and who knows the streams is the one who makes the "killings." In normal times the average trout fisherman is lucky if he can spend a week or two in the North and can make four or five weekend trips otherwise during the season. Naturally he cannot expect to strike conditions right each time and his take is relatively small, but multiply it by several hundred thousand and the total catch is significant.

It has often been stated that most of our trout waters were overfished prior to the war and that this was a factor making for unsatisfactory fishing. Creel census studies show that the angling pressure on trout streams was approximately four times as heavy as on bass and bluegill lakes. Whether the removal of trout by anglers during the first part of the season from our better trout streams affects the later catch is open to question. Complete catch records for several seasons were secured from sections of a number of streams including the Pine and Little Manistee Rivers in Lake County, the North Branch of the Au Sable near Lovells, and the East Branch of the Tahquamenon in the Upper Peninsula. In none of these was there any marked decline in the catch of wild trout as the season progressed; in fact the catch per hour was actually better in June than in May for most waters and showed no decline even in late August on heavily fished streams. It is true that legal-sized plantings are soon caught out and only temporarily boost the catch per hour, but the natural production, which is the mainstay of the angler in our principal streams at least, seems to maintain trout fishing on a pretty even keel throughout the summer.

What about southern Michigan trout streams such as Dowagiac River, Spring Creek, Paw Paw River, Rice Creek and the smaller streams which remain cold enough for trout in summer and therefore deserve to be classed as trout waters? The Department has no complete creel census data for these streams but presumably they are fished more heavily than those farther north and their natural productivity is lower because of extensive drainage of many spring tributaries which are the natural breeding and nursery areas for trout. Research is demonstrating that if the headwaters and spring-fed tributaries can be preserved, nature can be expected to pretty well take care of the stocking of our trout streams. Enough mature trout escape the fishermen to produce all the young trout (and perhaps more than enough in

some waters) these streams can grow to maturity. Of course if the majority of anglers are not satisfied with the normal yield of our trout waters, legal-sized trout from hatcheries can be added up to the limit they are willing to pay and fishing can be artificially stimulated for a week or so after each planting.

In so far as trout streams are concerned, there is no evidence that they were being overfished prior to the war or at present. Where we have reliable data on northern streams it would seem that in spite of the heavy pressure the trout catch holds up well throughout the season. There is no valid argument for a lower limit in these findings.

Trout lakes are different

The facts from trout lakes--especially small "made" trout lakes (2 to 25 acres), where fishing is maintained largely or entirely by hatchery plantings since natural spawning conditions for trout are lacking, are quite different. Catch records from lakes planted with marked trout show that from 80 to 94 per cent of the previous fall plantings of legal-sized fish are caught out on opening day, leaving little for angling the rest of the season. On larger lakes trout are not taken out so rapidly.

The need for a lower limit on such waters is self evident. Obviously the trout stock is endangered by such fishing and a relatively few people get the bulk of the plantings.

The release of legal-sized trout in streams also makes the present limit too easily obtainable by a few fishermen who happen to be there shortly after a planting has been made and when conditions are right for feeding. Limits are taken in a few hours even by "dubs" who have never caught trout before in their lives. If the number of legal-sized plantings in streams and small lakes is to be increased, a lower limit is necessary in order to make these plantings yield the maximum amount of sport.

Creel census figures for some of the best trout streams in the state taken during the four years before Pearl Harbor show that very few trout fishermen reached the present limit even when heavy plantings of hatchery trout were made during the season. Data from such streams showed that from 41 to 79 per cent caught no trout on an average day; from 1.2 to 5 per cent took 5 trout; from 0 to 0.7 per cent 10 trout, and from 0 to 0.2 took the limit of 15. If "par" in trout fishing is the limit, we can see why some trout fishermen complain that fishing is poor.

The story on "made" trout lakes is quite different. Eighteen of 32 anglers fishing Kimes Lake, Newaygo County took the limit the first day of the season in 1942. One man had 15 before 7 o'clock, came in and got his wife and left with 30 trout within an hour. A check on Holland Lake, Luce County, that same year showed that 18 fishermen removed 125 trout before 8:00 a.m. on opening day. The same story comes from creel census checks made on other small lakes which were stocked with legal-sized fish.

Probably one of the best arguments for attainable limits is psychological. Ken Reid, National Izaak Walton League head, tells the story of meeting two fishermen on a stream when the limit there was 25 trout. Each was close to the limit but each felt he had failed that day because he had not attained it. Several years later when the limit was 15 he met the same fishermen who were beaming over limit catches although they had fewer trout in the basket than on the first occasion.

It is reasonable to suppose that a lower limit in Michigan would satisfy more anglers and would help to spread the fishing for hatchery-reared trout in small lakes and in streams. Results from the studies reported suggest that different limits should be placed on trout taken from lakes and streams because they are more easily caught out in small lakes and because the average size of a trout from lakes is much greater

than the average from streams. Several states impose limits as low as 2 per day in certain waters, especially in lakes, and in a number artificial lures only are permitted on certain waters. It is recognized that this might present some enforcement problems but other states do not seem to have found them insurmountable nor have such problems been reported here in enforcing the special limit of 5 trout in force on Lake Charlevoix and Birch Lake.

Based on research and observation, it would seem that the limit on streams might properly be set at 10 and on trout lakes at 5.

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By A. S. Hazzard

Report typed by V. M. Andres