

## **Results of Early Season, Catch-and-Release Bass Fishing at Six Lakes**

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*Abstract.*—A special regulation allowing anglers to catch-and-release largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) and smallmouth bass (*M. dolomieu*) from April 1 to the Memorial Day weekend, prior to the normal bass season, was tested on six lakes from 1988 to 1990. Effects on both fisheries and bass populations were evaluated at five lakes by means of opinion questionnaires, periodic catch surveys, and bass recruitment surveys. About 82% of the anglers approved of this test fishery and would approve of extending the concept of preseason catch-and-release fishing to some other lakes, 8% disapproved, and 10% had no opinion. Spring bass fishing effort increased approximately 40%, on average. Spring bass catch was modest. The quality of bass fishing, as measured by number of bass caught per hour, was no higher in the early season than during the normal season. Recruitment of small bass to these populations did not appear to be harmed by fishing during the spawning period. Changes in spring bass fishing effort and catch were smaller than expected, mainly because many anglers (about 44% of all anglers and 69% of the frequent bass anglers) were already in the habit of fishing for bass prior to the normal bass season. Thus, to a large extent, the special season simply made angler behavior legitimate. A large percentage (83) of all anglers said they usually release most of the legal-length bass they catch during the normal bass season. No unusual law enforcement or other problems were encountered. A wide-open policy on bass tournaments is not recommended because it could generate excessive fishing pressure on a few lakes. We recommend that the concept of preseason catch-and-release bass fishing be continued on these six lakes and extended to other southern Michigan lakes which have a history of good bass recruitment, ample adult bass populations, light to moderate fishing effort in summer, and no problems with excessive populations of slow-growing panfish. A revision of Fisheries Division policy will be necessary to implement this recommendation.