

## MUSKIES TOP PRIORITY IN POTATO LAKE FISH PLAN

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**Potato lake** is one of 21 lakes in northern Wisconsin where local users, owners, organizations, businesses, The Potato Lake Association, and the DNR collectively developed specific goals and objective for a **Fishery Management Plan**. In June of 2006, a meeting was held to identify important fish species and to set priorities. It was decided by an overwhelming majority to manage the fishery in the following order of priority: **Muskies first, then panfish, walleye, northern pike, and largemouth bass.**

The meeting was spearheaded by individuals who noticed a decline of musky numbers. As a result of the plan, the DNR has doubled the Potato Lake musky stocking rate to 534 fingerlings every other year. This however, is much lower than the stocking rate that was in effect up until 1997. The DNR stocks and pays for the muskies which cost around \$12 each. Members have asked why we do not put the money we spend on walleyes and buy more musky fingerlings. The DNR biologists believe we have the proper stocking rate, as earlier studies have shown that Potato Lake was developing a predator heavy fishery which was slowing the growth of existing muskies. **The DNR said they would reduce their stocking number by any number of musky fingerlings stocked by our association.** However, many local fisherpersons feel there has been a significant decline in muskies over the past 5 years. Hopefully we will get some answers this spring. In spring 2013 WDNR's Fishery Team from Park Falls will be assessing the status of sport fish populations in Potato Lake. At ice out they will be installing fyke nets in our lake to evaluate the abundance and size structure northern pike, walleye, muskies, and yellow perch. Later in spring they will do a shoreline electrofishing survey to gauge bass and bluegill populations. Then, in fall they will do a crappie fyke netting survey. Observers and helpers are welcome.

DNR biologists speculated that the shortage of adult **walleyes** may be caused by abundant largemouth bass eating most of the young walleye produced in Potato Lake. The recommended solution was to stock large walleye fingerlings, which cost around \$2.40 per fingerling. These 6" to 8" fingerlings may have an advantage in size or behavior to avoid predation by largemouth bass.

The DNR does not have the funding to stock large walleye fingerlings. **To our credit, the Lake Association has raised funds to stock 2200 large fingerlings in each of the years 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012. The total cost for these four plantings was almost \$22,000.** We now will continue every other year stocking into the extended future, provided funds are available. Many are reporting increased walleye catches as a result of the stocking. Many thanks to all the volunteers who helped distribute fish throughout the lake, despite the weather!

We are encouraged to keep and eat legal-size largemouth bass in an attempt to reduce their numbers to help the natural walleye reproduction. At the same time we are encouraged to practice catch and release with walleyes.

It is hoped that the panfish will increase in size with an increase in walleye predators thinning their numbers. Excessive panfish abundance leads competition and stunted growth in bluegill and crappie populations. Walleye, especially young walleye, can effectively control bluegill and crappie abundance in their first few years, and yellow perch also eat bluegill fingerlings in winter. Northern pike, largemouth bass, and muskellunge are less effective predators of bluegill and crappie, probably because they prefer cylindrical shaped prey like perch and suckers.

Potato Lake is in the Ceded Territory which allows spearing by Native Americans. Early spearing was fairly high. From 1998 through 2001 133 walleyes and 24 muskies were harvested. Since then only a minor number of fish have been speared in total; 13 walleyes and 7 muskies. A significant number of muskies are killed each year by being gut hooked by people fishing with live suckers and allowing the muskies to swallow the bait. This loss can be reduced by using quick set rigs, setting the hook right away, and never leaving a pole unattended which would allow the bait to be swallowed. Studies have shown that the delayed mortality rate for released gut hooked fish is over 80%. The hooks do not dissolve, and many the fish die from injury or infection up to one year after a seemingly successful live release.

The Lake Association mainly raises money from profits from the 4<sup>th</sup> of July boat parade by selling meals, raffling items and auctioning bigger items. More money is raised thru the annual dues and sale of specialty items at the bars such as buttons, tapes and openers. Special thanks to all those who have donated items for the auction, especially Jim Jenson, Darrell Solberg, Mick Heilman, Debbie Engh, and Dick Manor, and many others. **But a very special thanks needs to go to each of the four resorts** that sponsor the boat parade. It takes a huge amount of work from them to coordinate the event from organizing the meal, getting volunteers, door prizes, auction items, auctioneers, and cleaning up. We are very lucky to have 4 supportive resorts on only a 534 acre lake. **We need to support them as they have supported us.** How else could we do the “Grand Slam?”

### **What can you do to help?**

1. **Keep** legal largemouth bass and **return** caught walleye.
2. **Attend** the Lake Association main fundraiser, the July 4th boat parade and **dinner**.
3. **Donate** and/or **buy** auction and other items after the parade dinner.
4. **Buy** the buttons, openers and tape measures we use to raise funds found in our 4 bars.
5. **Encourage others** to join our Lake Association, and maintain your annual membership (\$10.00!). Members do not have to be owners or renters. They just have to have an interest in improving our lake and having fun!! We now have almost 150 members.

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