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# **Proposal for Managing the Lake Whitefish Sport Fishery in Ontario**

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This report describes the regulatory options for managing the lake whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*) sport fishery in Ontario. The recommendations are based on the synthesis of current scientific knowledge on the effectiveness of regulations for managing lake whitefish and the need to modernize regulations making them simpler, easier to understand and enforce. They are a combination of management strategies designed to protect lake whitefish stocks from overexploitation and to optimize angling opportunities where possible.

To provide consistency in the management of lake whitefish in Ontario, the recommendations contained herein are the recommended options to be used in the development of any new regulations for lake whitefish. Exceptions will be considered if they are required for sustainability and are supported by sound scientific evidence. In cases where the existing regulations do not conform to the approach in this report, they should be analyzed using criteria set out in the Provincial Approvals in Principle process and adjusted to meet the provincial standard if appropriate.

The lake herring belongs to the same biological family as lake whitefish and the two species are often misidentified by anglers. Lake herring are an important commercial and recreational fish in the Great Lakes, and are caught as food and bait in inland lakes by both commercial and angling methods. This species tool kit will focus on lake whitefish, although recommendations on the harvest of herring by non-angling methods will also be addressed since they are treated the same in the regulations regarding dip-netting. Where conservation concerns exist for lake herring from either a commercial or angling perspective, they will be addressed separately from this tool kit.

## Introduction

Lake whitefish are widely distributed across Canada. In Ontario, they occur in the Great Lakes and most watersheds except for southwestern Ontario where suitable lakes are lacking. Based on the Ontario Fisheries Information System (OFIS) inventory database, there are at least 2,150 Ontario waters that contain lake whitefish (Kerr and Wakefield 2003) (Figure 1), including all of the Great Lakes.

Lake whitefish are known for their value as a food fish. During the exploration and settlement of Ontario, lake whitefish were important as a source of food for early residents. Lake whitefish have sustained a valuable commercial fishery on the Great Lakes for more than a century and are important commercial and subsistence food item for aboriginal people, particularly in northwestern Ontario. They are also sought by recreational anglers, particularly during the winter and

spring, as well as by dip-netters during the fall. Probably the best known recreational fishery for lake whitefish is on Lake Simcoe (Desjardine and Lawrence 1977).

Lake whitefish populations are highly responsive to environmental and climatic conditions (Miller 1956, Pokrovskii 1960, Ebener 1997). Although overexploitation has been known to cause a lake whitefish fishery to collapse (Miller 1949), lake whitefish have shown the capability to recover if fishing effort is controlled (Miller 1956).

Historically, most efforts to control the exploitation of lake whitefish have focused on the commercial fishery. With the exception of Lake Simcoe, there have been few regulations restricting the harvest of lake whitefish by the recreational fishery.

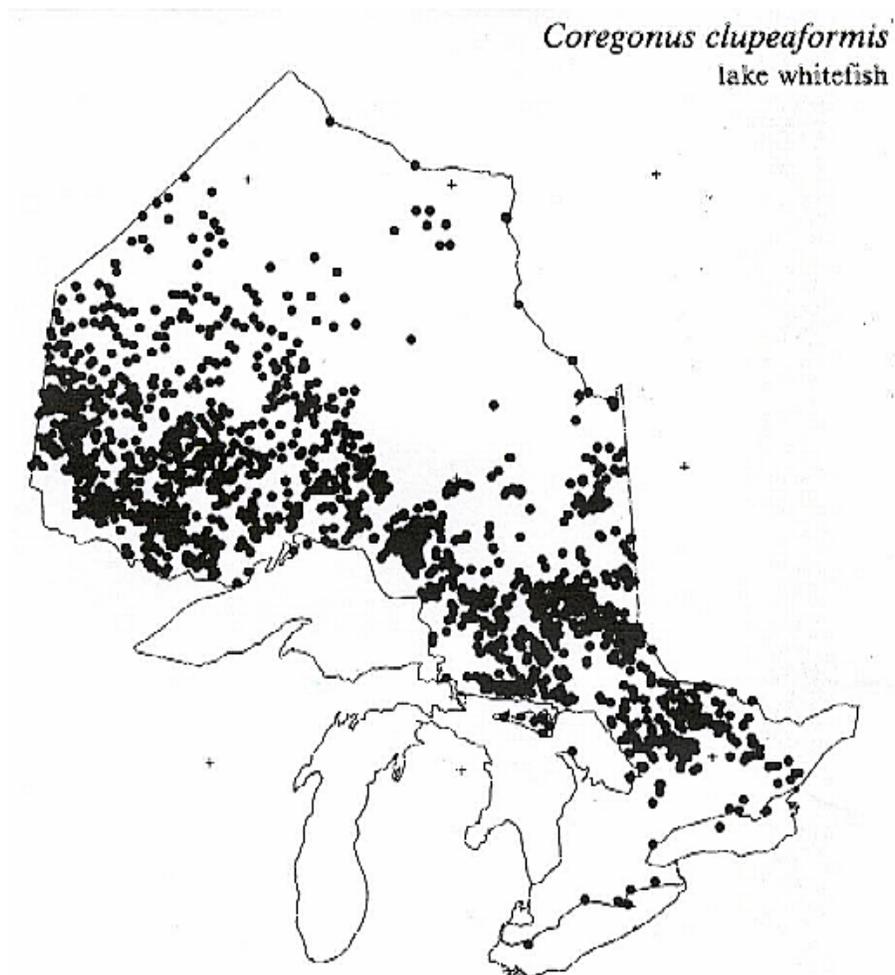


Figure 1. Distribution of lake whitefish in Ontario (reproduced from Mandrak and Crossman (1992) with permission of the Royal Ontario Museum).

## Open/Closed Seasons

In most parts of Ontario the season for lake whitefish is open year round or year round except for December 24 (for administrative purposes).

A closed season for lake whitefish on Lake Simcoe was first designated in the late 1950s because of concerns of declining stocks. The open season was shortened again in 1977 (Desjardine and Lawrence 1977). Other closed seasons for lake whitefish coincide with closed seasons for all species (e.g., Division 6,13) and are not specifically aimed at conserving whitefish stocks.

Currently, there are eleven different open seasons for lake whitefish in Ontario (Table 1).

Table 1. Open seasons for lake whitefish in Ontario (based on the *Ontario Fishery Regulations, 1989*, as amended).

Open Season	Division(s)
All year (except December 24)	2, 12, 12A, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 22A, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34
Open all Year	1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 18, 26, 28, 29
Last Saturday in April - November 15	4 (part - Regional Municipality of Durham), 6
Last Saturday in April – September 30	4 (part – Bruce and Grey Counties excluding waters set out in Schedules VIII and IX)
Last Saturday in April – November 30	13
Last Saturday in April - December 31	Bayfield River, Maitland River and Nine Mile River (Division 4)
January 1-March 15; Saturday before Victoria Day – November 30; December 25 – December 31	27
January 1 - March 15; second Saturday in May – October 5	5 (Lake Simcoe)
January 1 – March 15, second Saturday in May – December 31	35
January 1 – March 15; Saturday before Victoria Day – December 31	Lake Nosbonsing (Division 15)
All year, but only from one half hour before sunrise to one half hour after sunset	Eagle Lake (Division 22)

Other than Lake Simcoe, there seems to be little evidence that season closures for lake whitefish are justified. There are fishing divisions, however, where the

season is closed (e.g., Divisions 6, 13, 27) for other reasons (e.g., to protect walleye or lake trout).

The season closure of December 24 is to allow the province to vary the closed season as opposed to creating an *Ontario Fishery Regulations* (OFR) amendment. This season closure is under review and will be removed for lake whitefish (Table 2).

### Recommended Season Dates:

- It is recommended that there be an all year open season for lake whitefish in most parts of Ontario.
- Existing season closures should be retained for Lake Simcoe and any other waterbodies where stock preservation or sustainability is a concern. The Lake Simcoe whitefish season is currently under review.
- Fishing Divisions that currently have winter closures for all species (e.g., 6 and 13) will remain closed.
- The exceptions in Division 4 should be reviewed to determine if they can be changed to the all year open season.
- The fishing seasons for Lake Nipissing and Lake Nosbonsing are under review as part of a management planning cycle.

Table 2. Recommended open seasons for lake whitefish in Ontario.

Open Season	Division(s)
Open all year	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 12A, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 22A, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35
January 1-March 15; 2nd Saturday in May – September 30	5 – Lake Simcoe (under review)
Last Saturday in April - November 15	6
Last Saturday in April - November 30	13
Under review as part of management plan	27

### Catch and Possession Limits

Catch and possession limits apply to fish taken both by angling and by dip-netting during the fall spawning period. Prior to 1980, the only catch and possession limits for lake whitefish were on Lake Simcoe where the limit of two fish per person was established in 1977. In 1980, a limit of 25 lake whitefish per person was established provincially. Since that time the limit has been changed to five fish in Division 12 (Ottawa River) for consistency with Québec regulations, a six fish limit was instituted in Division 34 in 2000 and, most recently (2001), a

12 fish limit was designated in the Sydney Lake area of northwestern Ontario (designated waters of Divisions 22 and 31). Currently, there are six different catch and possession limits for lake whitefish in Ontario (Table 3).

Table 3. Catch and possession limits for lake whitefish in Ontario (based on the 2003 Recreational Fishing Regulations Summary).

Division(s)	Catch Limit by Licence Type		Possession Limit by Licence Type	
	Sport	Conservation	Sport	Conservation
1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12A, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 22A, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35	25	12	25	12
5 (Lake Simcoe)	2	2	2	2
12 (Ottawa River)	5	5	5	5
34	6	6	6	6
Designated waters of Divisions 22 and 31 (Sydney Lake area)	12	12	12	12
Obabika Lake (18)	12	6	12	6

Many anglers view a catch and possession limit as a target quantity of fish that must be taken to have a successful experience. Furthermore, in situations where fish are highly vulnerable, for example when dip-netting fish during their fall spawning activities, there is the potential for local spawning stocks to be overexploited. Given the value of lake whitefish as a sport and food fish, it is felt that a more conservative daily catch limit should be established to ensure sustainability and provide a consistent approach across the province (Table 4).

#### **Recommended Catch and Possession Limits:**

- **It is recommended that the daily catch and possession limit be changed to 12 fish for holders of an Ontario sport fishing licence and to 6 fish for anglers with a conservation licence.**
- **The definition of where catch limits apply on Lake Simcoe should be changed to include all tributaries to be consistent with yellow perch and to avoid problems of having mixed catch limits for the same lake whitefish population.**
- **Divisions 12 and 34 and the designated waters of Divisions 22 and 31 should be reviewed to determine if they can align with the provincial standard.**

- **Conservation licence limits should be half the sport fish limit in all areas (e.g., Lake Simcoe).**

Table 4: Recommended catch and possession limits for lake whitefish in Ontario.

Division(s)	Catch Limit by Licence Type		Possession Limit by Licence Type	
	Sport	Conservation	Sport	Conservation
1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12A, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 22A, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35	12	6	12	6
5 (Lake Simcoe)	2	1	2	1

## Size Limit Regulations

Size limit regulations have not been used as a tool in managing the sport fishery for lake whitefish in Ontario. In addition, there is presently little, if any, information on how effective such regulations might be.

**Recommended Size Limit Regulations:** Size limit regulations should not be considered in managing lake whitefish. Any use of size limit regulations would be considered experimental and should be accompanied by an assessment program designed to measure and document their effectiveness.

## Fish Sanctuaries

There are no sanctuaries in Ontario which are designed to protect lake whitefish. There could be instances, however, where protection of a sensitive area (e.g., spawning site) may be required, particularly where stock status is of concern.

**Recommended Use of Fish Sanctuaries:** The use of fish sanctuaries for lake whitefish should be limited to those instances where protection can be rationalized on the basis of concern for status of the local lake whitefish population. Closed seasons for lake whitefish should be used rather than sanctuaries, if possible, so as not to limit angling for other species.

## Harvest by Means other than Angling

In addition to angling, lake whitefish and lake herring can be harvested from specified waters during the fall using dip-nets under the authority of a dip-net

licence. Dip-nets cannot be more than 183 cm (6 feet) on each side if square or 183 cm (6 feet) in diameter if circular.

Prior to the Ontario resident sport fishing licence, a dip-net licence to take fish for personal use was issued to authorize this activity and to identify waterbodies and time periods when dip-netting could occur. When the resident sport fishing licence was implemented in 1987, the requirement for a dip-net licence was not revoked. In 1993, the fee for the dip-net licence was removed. There is no requirement to have an Ontario sport fishing licence in addition to the dip-net licence. Presently, there is a lack of consistency in administering the dip-net licence across the province.

In 2002, approximately 766 dip-net licences were issued for 133 waterbodies across the province. About 569 licences were issued for lake whitefish, 69 licences were issued for herring, and 127 licences were issued for lake whitefish and herring. None of the districts reported any harvest information, or the requirement to report harvest information.

### **Recommendation:**

In order to streamline lake whitefish and lake herring dip-netting, the following is recommended:

- **Remove the requirement for a dip-net licence to take lake whitefish and lake herring for food. (Note the taking of lake herring for bait requires a commercial bait licence).**
- **Permit anglers with a sport fishing licence to take lake whitefish and lake herring for with a dip-net for food from October 1 – November 15 in designated waters only.**
- **The catch and possession limits for lake whitefish will be the same as angling for each type of sport fishing licence (12 lake whitefish for a sport fishing licence and 6 lake whitefish for a conservation fishing licence).**
- **There will be no province wide catch and possession limits for lake herring. In areas where conservation concerns for lake herring exist, the catch and possession limit will be implemented on a local basis and will be the same as lake whitefish.**
- **The designated waters will be regulated through the Ontario Fishery Regulations but will not listed in the fishing summary. Anglers wishing to dip net lake whitefish or lake herring will be directed to their local MNR office to obtain a list of waters where dip-netting is allowed.**

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