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Predators rising against kokanee

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Trout research to switch to gill nets

COEUR d'ALENE -- Lake Pend Oreille kokanee, the favored food of the big lake's larger fish, are facing bad news on two fronts.

First, researchers believe the population of mackinaw, also known as lake trout, is growing. Second, anglers are releasing most of the rainbow trout they catch.

Mackinaw and rainbow trout are the biggest predators for the declining kokanee salmon.

Research on the lake trout population will resume in February with a shift to gill netting, said Ned Horner, regional fisheries manager for Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

"Gill nets will be used to provide a better estimate of the entire lake trout population in Lake Pend Oreille," he said.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game will have a meeting Jan. 21 in Sandpoint to update the community on results from recent trap netting that concluded last week.

Predator/prey management will also be a crucial part of the discussion at the meeting.

Live trap netting indicated a significant increase in lake trout numbers over the past two years, Horner said.

About 1,600 lake trout were caught and released in 15,000 hours of effort between October to mid-December, compared to 1,100 lake trout in 31,000 hours in 2003-04. The current population estimate for lake trout is around 10,700 fish over 20 inches, compared to 6,400 fish in 2003-04.

Just as discouraging, rainbow trout anglers released the highest percentage of fish (70 percent) during the Thanksgiving Derby than at any time since harvest restrictions were relaxed on the lake.

Regulation changes were implemented in 2000 to reverse the kokanee decline. Kokanee fishing was closed and rainbow trout limits were increased to six of any size. The limit on mackinaw was removed.

But fisheries managers are finding it difficult to convince anglers that it's in the best interest of the trophy trout fishery to harvest rainbows until the prey base, the kokanee, recovers.

If the kokanee population collapses, the permanent demise of the rainbow trout fishery won't be far behind.

"Management for trophy rainbow trout is part of the management plan for Lake Pend Oreille, but if we lose kokanee, we will be out of business," Horner said.

Awards of up to \$30,000 per derby for lake trout have done little to curb the expansion of mackinaw, Horner said.

"It's becoming increasingly clear that we will not be able to control lake trout expansion in Lake Pend Oreille with a sport fishery alone," he said.

Deep-set gill nets were recommended by three lake trout scientists from the Great Lakes and Canada who were asked to interpret information from the Lake Pend Oreille system and provide a critical analysis of Fish and Game's research and management direction.

Melo Maiolie, Fish and Game fishery research biologist, estimated that about half of the fish caught in the gill nets will die as a result of the overnight sets.

"The goal is to reduce the population of lake trout, but it probably won't be enough to drive the population down," he said.

All salvageable mackinaw and whitefish will be filleted and donated to area food banks. Whitefish is the most abundant fish in the lake.

The gill nets will probably increase the incidental death of some bull trout. Native bull trout, which feed to a lesser extent on kokanee, are a federally protected species.

Maiolie said Fish and Game is seeking a permit to increase the allowable take of bull trout for the gill netting project.

By comparison, the last round of trap netting saw a mortality rate of 2.2 percent for mackinaw and nearly 12 percent for bull trout.

The deep gill nets are expected to kill few if any rainbow trout or cutthroat trout, which aren't known to inhabit the anticipated set depths of 50 to 200 feet.

If there's a ray of hope in the latest population counts, it's that higher winter pool levels are providing more spawning habitat, leading to significant improvement in kokanee egg-to-fry survival.

Survival was only 2 percent during the drawdown winter of 2003-04, but 9 percent during the winter of 2004-05 when the lake was held at elevation 2,055.

"The irony of the situation is that this year, we've got the second-highest number of kokanee fry in the lake that we've ever recorded," Maiolie said. "There's more than 12 million fry with hatchery and wild together."

But that glimmer is overshadowed by a decline in survival rates of 1- and 2-year-old kokanee.

Kokanee are not surviving to adults. "Unless we get the predator problem under control, they will never make it through to have enough adults to keep things going," Maiolie said.

Horner added, "The gains are being eaten up by predators. There are fewer age-3 kokanee in the lake, and the total pounds of all kokanee is declining."