

WDNR's local Fishery Team from Park Falls took several initial steps to clarify some misperceptions about Department policy on fish passage and to address citizen concerns about the potential unintended consequences to the fish community in the Pike Lake Chain, if the lake and river ecosystems were to be reconnected by installing a nature-like fishway. Specific questions raised to date along with preliminary answers are summarized below.

- Is WDNR working on a policy to require fish passage at all dams in northern Wisconsin?

No, WDNR has no such policy initiative. In 2015 WDNR's Fish Passage Policy Team launched a *Strategic Analysis of Fish Passage at Dams* to inform decision-makers and the public about this complex topic. The purpose of the *Strategic Analysis* is to objectively summarize the current scientific information, potential environmental and economic benefits and impacts, and applicable regulations related to fish passage at dams. More information about the *Strategic Analysis of Fish Passage at Dams* is posted at <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/EIA/FPSA.html>. A draft document will be available for public comment soon. Following revision to address any comments received, the final *Strategic Analysis* will aid in drafting future policy that promotes a consistent approach for evaluating fish passage proposals in Wisconsin.

- What effect will predation by catfish have on walleye and other important sportfish populations in the Chain, if catfish were to move into the Chain via the proposed fishway?

Catfish already occupy the Pike Lake Chain in trace abundance. A search of electronic records in WDNR's Fishery Management Database revealed that electrofishing catches from Round Lake in 1992 and 2012 included one channel catfish captured in each survey. The blue catfish from a 1998 fyke netting survey in Pike Lake was likely a channel catfish recorded incorrectly.

In a cursory review of fishery publications, we found a 1948 study¹ that evaluated the food habits of channel catfish in the Des Moines River, a prairie stream in Iowa where walleye and smallmouth were both rather common and increasing in numbers, crappies were uncommon, and northern pike and yellow perch were very rare. The authors analyzed stomach contents of 912 channel catfish, 769 containing food. Theirs and earlier findings show that channel catfish are omnivorous—they eat a wide variety of insects, fish, and plant seeds. Young catfish feed almost exclusively on aquatic insect larvae. In the diet of catfish longer than 12 inches, fish and large insects were important. Proportions of insects and fish found in catfish stomachs closely reflected the relative abundance of those prey items in the river, demonstrating that channel catfish did not select or prefer specific foods over others available to them. No catfish stomachs contained walleye, smallmouth bass, or other sportfish.

Channel catfish occur in the North and South Forks of the Flambeau River, but little is known about their abundance and upstream-downstream distribution because traditionally our surveys targeted other species at wadable depths where catfish are seldom found. To supplement the sparse information available from incidental catches we consulted with Fishery Teams in central and southern Wisconsin where catfish are important components of the recreational fishery. They advised us on effective techniques and offered to loan us specialized gear to specifically target channel catfish in deep water in mid-summer. In July and August 2017 our Fishery Team will deploy baited hoop nets in the deep pools we can find in the South Fork Flambeau River, beginning at the Round Lake Dam and continuing downstream toward the mouth.

- Why would we allow, entice, or provide an avenue for sturgeon to move into the Chain when they typically spawn in rivers? Will a fishway lure sturgeon into the lakes where their population will just die out?

¹ Reeve M. Bailey & Harry M. Harrison Jr. (1948) Food Habits of the Southern Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus lacustris punctatus*) in the Des Moines River, Iowa, Transactions of the American Fisheries Society, 75:1, 110-138.

As the name implies, a nature-like fishway at the Round Lake Dam would mimic as closely as possible the natural conditions that were present before the original dam was constructed. The conceptual design would let sturgeon and other fish to move freely upstream and downstream on their own to again occupy habitats and use resources that were largely inaccessible for a long time. Sturgeon, redhorse, and suckers would be able to move from the river into the Chain to eat bottom-dwelling food or to overwinter in deeper water that became scarce in the South Fork following soil erosion and deposition from past logging practices. These and other species that typically spawn in flowing water would have the freedom to return to the river to spawn and fulfill all portions of their life cycle. The ecological objective of providing fish passage is to allow the entire aquatic community to mingle and interact in the habitats where they evolved. We expect various fish species will voluntarily enter and leave the Chain, perhaps seasonally, as needed to meet their needs. Allowing fish to move in both directions past this man-made obstruction to use additional food and space would serve to enhance, rather than jeopardize, the productivity and long-term well-being of sturgeon and other aquatic populations.

- Is the objective of providing fish passage to increase biodiversity in the Chain?

The South Fork Flambeau River and the Pike Lake Chain have similar native fish communities, and we do not expect that a nature-like fishway will result in substantial changes to their species composition. File records document 37 fish species in the river and 29 in the Chain. Our biodiversity goal is to maintain a diverse native fish community that fluctuates in species composition, but generally experiences no net loss of native fish species and provides adequate forage for sport fish populations. Fish passage at the dam would maintain or restore the predator-prey interactions that are vital for satisfactory growth rates and condition factors in fish populations important to anglers.