

Protecting spawning habitat critical to Wisconsin's state fish

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MADISON – By protecting habitat that is suitable for muskellunge spawning state fisheries biologists hope to augment successful musky management strategies that have already helped make the legendary “fish of 10,000 casts” more like the fish of 3,000 casts in Wisconsin.

To that end, the Musky Clubs Alliance of Wisconsin, University of Michigan researchers and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources fish biologists this week will launch a habitat study on 20 lakes in northern Wisconsin to help identify and predict where the famed fighters spawn.

“We want to be able to protect the existing musky spawning habitat that is out there because naturally reproducing populations are those that are the most valuable,” says Paul Cunningham, a DNR fisheries policy ecologist. “You don’t have to stock those lakes, they sustain themselves.”

The habitat study will occur on lakes in Vilas, Oneida, Forest, Douglas, Sawyer, Washburn and Bayfield counties. Once darkness falls, research teams using handheld spotlights will search the entire shoreline of each lake for spawning muskies. Each time a musky is seen, the location will be marked and its position will be recorded using digital mapping software. Researchers will later return to the site to verify that spawning occurred by searching for eggs on the bottom.

The researchers will analyze the environmental conditions at spawning locations, collecting information such as groundwater flow, stream location, land and aquatic vegetation and other conditions around the lake where muskies were seen spawning.

“We will use the data to build a model that describes the spawning habitats,” says Dr. Jim Diana, an associate dean and natural resources professor at the University of Michigan. “It will give us a pretty good idea of the spawning habitat, which we can then apply to other lakes with similar conditions without having to necessarily go out and do all the identification.”

This project will provide valuable knowledge that will be useful on emerging issues such as shoreline development, aquatic plant management, land acquisition and zoning ordinances.

“It affords us an opportunity to critically evaluate impacts when we alter habitat through human activities,” says Cunningham, “whether it’s pier placement, herbicides or removal of aquatic vegetation.”

Earlier research conducted by the University of Michigan and DNR showed that lakes with self-sustaining musky populations were mostly surrounded by forest, whereas lakes that required stocking had less shoreline and more human development

Muskies are more susceptible to change in habitat than many other species, yet protecting their critical habitats hasn't received much attention from musky clubs to date, according to Bob Haase, Executive Director of Musky Clubs Alliance of Wisconsin and avid musky fisherman for nearly 40 years.

"We've concentrated so much on stocking because it's a feel good thing," says Haase. "The clubs will raise money and buy muskies, help the DNR raise muskies and then stock the muskies in the lake, which may take away from natural reproduction. If we can find out more about spawning habitats and characteristics, then maybe we can go back and instead of using all the money to stock muskies, we could use half on stocking and the other half on habitat improvement."

Cunningham says the clubs' involvement has been critical in enabling the habitat project to occur. Musky Clubs Alliance of Wisconsin coordinated all the volunteers, collected most of the equipment and funded the majority of the project. Cabela's in Richfield and Dutch's Trading Post in Fond du Lac also provided equipment.

"We're excited about working with them on a topic that's so important and on which we have such a common ground of interest," says Cunningham.

People interested in the project are invited to attend a presentation at 7 p.m., May 4, at the Kemp Natural Resources Station, 8031 Kemp Woods Road, Woodruff. Those who would like to attend should contact Karla Ortman to register, (715) 358-5667 or by e-mail to [kemp@calshp.cals.wisc.edu].

More information on [musky management](#) can be found on the DNR Web site.

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