AN UPDATE ON NESTING BASS STUDIES

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Based upon our long-term studies on bass reproduction and recruitment combined with our recently published results on how reduced angling pressure on nesting bass during the COVID years (2020-21) created the largest year classes of bass seen since we started the study in 1990, we submitted a proposal to the OMNRF to evaluate the impact of Bass Spawning Sanctuaries. Specifically, we have proposed to have areas of two study lakes in the region (Charleston and Opinicon) officially designated as Bass Spawning Sanctuaries that would be so designated and published in the 2024-2025 Fishing Regulations for Ontario. Fishing for all species would be prohibited in those areas from April 15 until July 10. After July 10, fishing for all species would be permitted as per the normal regulations. Our research team from Carleton University, the University of Illinois, the Queen’s University Biological Station, and the Fisheries Conservation Foundation would then study the impacts of those Bass Spawning Sanctuaries on annual reproductive success and recruitment of the bass populations in those two lakes.

The proposal for this pilot study has been viewed favorably by the OMNRF, and they have issued a public notice to get feedback from interested persons. That Public Notice can be found at <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-6728>. Maps of the proposed areas can be obtained from the OMNRF. Note, however, that those maps are first drafts and will likely change based on the input received by OMNRF. We strongly urge everyone to provide your feedback, even if it is just to say that you are in favor of the study moving forward. Feel free to voice concerns as well; all info will be used to make decisions.

We believe that this innovative conservation approach to manage angling for bass in local lakes is imperative to protect the health of the bass populations and the quality of the fishery. As of this writing (5/16/23) we have already observed extremely high levels of angling-induced reproductive failures (nests abandoned by their parental males) in Opinicon at the beginning of the 2023 spawning period (which is still underway). We expect to see similar results in Charleston once the spawning there really gets underway. Once enacted (hopefully in 2024), the proposed Bass Spawning Sanctuaries will provide full protection for the many bass spawning within them, thereby serving as an important source of production for young bass across the entire lake.

The COVID study discussed above has recently been published in Fisheries Research:

Philipp, D. P., A. Zolderdo, M. J. Lawrence, J. E. Claussen, L. Nowell, P.Holder, S. J. Cooke. 2022. COVID-19 reduced recreational fishing effort during the black bass spawning season, resulting in increases in black bass reproductive success and annual recruitment. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fishres.2022.106580