



Short Ears, Long Tales

Courte Oreilles Lakes Association

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Wanted: Anglers who know how to harvest pike

By Kathy Hanson
Contributing Writer

April 3-7 was a busy week on Lac Courte Oreilles, particularly Musky Bay, and it wasn't about watching the ice go out.

The [LCO Esox Recovery Plan](#) was launched—a cooperative effort between the Wisconsin DNR, LCO Conservation Department, COLA and the Hayward Lakes Chapter of Muskies, Inc.—to reduce the abundance of northern pike and increase the abundance of muskellunge (Esoc).

It's not the first time pike have been netted and removed from the lake and it won't be the last. It's one of the objectives laid out in the 2006 LCO Fisheries Management Plan, according to DNR Fishery Biologist Max Wolter who said historically Lac Courte Oreilles had only muskellunge and was a world-renowned musky fishing destination.

"Pike are not believed to be native to the Couderay drainage. Records show they likely got into the lake in the 1940s and slowly increased in abundance. By the 70s pike were starting to overtake musky and since that time the lake has had a much higher abundance of pike compared to musky," Wolter said the day after the project ended.

Kevin Horrocks, a member of COLA's board of directors, emphasized the scope of the problem. "It gets down to the food chain. The large number of northern pike, which are top tier predators, means they are eating virtually any fish they can. They are eating machines. They don't eat just minnows like people put on a hook as bait. The pike are eating young muskies, walleye, bass, other northern pike, perch, cisco, and whitefish, too."

Wolter added, "We can estimate that a pike would eat 0.05 grams of food per gram of their body weight per day. That means about 45 grams a day for an average pike. Extrapolate that out to the number we removed and we're talking about almost 300 pounds of other fish eaten every day... Take that out to a year and we're looking at 100,000 pounds of fish consumed annually by the LCO pike population."

Removing pike is just one of the strategies, Wolter said, adding that the next stage will involve stocking musky into LCO to try and boost the population in the short term; and the last step—and the most challenging—will be to restore the musky spawning habitat in Musky Bay to promote a healthier population over the long term.

"These three actions together give us the best chance of achieving our goal," said Wolter.



DNR crew collecting pike and taking them to shore for measurement. Photo by Gary Pulford.

Netting the pike

During the five day project, the crews assembled daily at 8:30 a.m. Boats were launched and the fish in the 14 fyke nets that were placed all around Musky Bay on April 2 were nearly all pulled by April 8, said Gary Pulford, COLA vice-president who was part of the team.

The fyke nets are set along shorelines where pike like to spawn. The pike follow the lead of the net into the area called the "pot" where they are trapped. The fish are not ensnared in any way, Wolter emphasized. Rather, they swim into the net and cannot find their way out.

DNR crews visit each net every day and collect the pike, take them to shore where they are measured, sex determined and examined for fin clips (several thousand pike were given a fin clip in 2016 as a means to estimate the total population size). Wolter said from that effort they are estimating today's population of pike in LCO to be 4,700-8,700, with a majority of those spawning in Musky Bay.



Pike being measured, sex determined, and examined for fish clips. Photo by Gary Pulford.

Processing the pike

Mike Persson, who is leading COLA's effort to re-establish the Musky habitat on Lac Courte Oreilles, was also part of this mission. He said the goal of this netting effort was to remove 3-4,000 pike, with some of the fish given to the Tribe for food, some put in the Couderay River and the bulk processed into fish patties and donated to area food banks, with the Hayward Lakes Chapter of Muskies, Inc. picking up the tab for the processing fee.

Wolter explained that the smaller pike are turned into fish patties, resulting in about 1,000 pounds of food donations. In this case, Mark Heath of Whiskey Ridge Meat Processing and Sport Shop of Radisson is turning them into pike patties, and food shelves and senior centers will benefit.

The larger pike are transferred to the Couderay River, giving anglers a chance to catch the "big fish." Generally, anglers are not interested in catching/keeping small pike but these fish should appeal to anglers. And some of the pike were cleaned and processed for LCO elders.

As of April 24 Wolter said 2,928 pike had been removed or transferred to the Couderay River, but those numbers are expected to rise as hatchery crews continue to work the nets through the end of the week, resulting in a few more hundred added to that total.



Pike destined for area food banks. Photo by Gary Pulford.

What now?

Gary Pulford said the project yielded "excellent results in terms of fish and collaborative effort."

Anglers can help in the pike removal effort too just by processing the pike they are already catching! Creel surveys on LCO have shown that about 85 percent of pike that anglers catch are released.

Wolter said most anglers will not consider harvesting pike until they reach a larger size, but by that time those pike may have already spawned a half dozen times.

"We are encouraging anglers to keep all pike they catch—especially those under 28 inches in length. Small pike are excellent for pickling. Cleaning pike is not as difficult as many people may believe it to be, and there are great tutorials on YouTube."

Wolter continued, "The DNR is aware that some anglers enjoy pike fishing on LCO and would like to assure them that there are still many pike left in the lake to catch. Additionally, the size of pike is expected to improve. The current average size is around 20 inches. This fall, the DNR plans to stock 3,500 musky fingerlings and 25,000 walleye fingerlings to replace the biomass of pike that were removed. With less pike in the lake to prey on these stocked fish the DNR is expecting better survival of the stocked walleye and musky. This should lead to better fishing for all three species down the road with more abundant walleye and musky, and a pike population with better average size. Reducing pike numbers may also be beneficial to perch and other panfish."

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COLA ANNUAL MEETING

Saturday June 24, 2017
St. Francis Solanis
Mission Church

COLA PICNIC

Saturday July 15, 2017
Trails End Resort

TIME TO RENEW YOUR COLA MEMBERSHIP FOR 2017!

COLA membership is a pretty good deal. For only 25\$/year, you help COLA protect LCO, and you get a picnic in return!

[Renew your membership](#) today in one of Wisconsin's most active and respected lake associations.

Are your neighbors and extended family members of COLA? If not, please ask them to [join](#).

COLA IN THE NEWS

[DNR Settles Suit by Agreeing to Move Toward Lake Pollution Limit](#)

April 18, 2017
By Steven Verburg,
Wisconsin State Journal

[DNR Agrees To Investigate Stricter Phosphorus Limits On Lac Courte Oreilles: Tribe, Lake Association Claim DNR Not Doing Enough To Protect Lake, Fishery](#)

April 18, 2017
By Rich Kremer, WPR News

[DNR, COLA, Tribe Settle Lawsuit on Lake Phosphorus Procedure](#)

April 26, 2017
By Terrell Boettcher, Sawyer County Record

UW-STEVENS POINT SELECTS COLA FOR OUTSTANDING PARTNERSHIP AWARD

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Geographic Information Systems Center (GIS Center) has selected COLA for its annual Outstanding Partner Award.

The award honors COLA's long-term commitment to gathering scientific and geographic evidence at the watershed scale and applying it to protect the two-story fishery on Lac Courte Oreille. (More about this project in next month's Short Ears Long Tales.)

SHORELAND BUFFERLAND MONEY AVAILABLE

COLA has received a WDNR grant to develop shoreland restoration plans and designs, make bulk plant purchases, and arrange construction and installation services from area landscapers. COLA will also help provide continuing education and a hands-on buffer zone training in partnership with the Sawyer County Lakes Forum and other local groups. The primary intended audience for education efforts extends to the Upper Couderay River Watershed lakes including Whitefish, Sand, Grindstone, Windigo, Sissabagama, Osprey, Round and Little Round.

Visit the COLA website for a variety of helpful, downloadable information on Shoreland Restoration for lake associations and lakefront homeowners. For questions and details, email Kris Sivertson, COLA president, at krisw3690@gmail.com or call [715-210-0818](tel:715-210-0818).

NEW COLA WEBSITE FEATURE - LAKE OBSERVATION FORMS

The COLA website has been revised to include a much-needed feature - a place to record [lake observations](#). As we've seen over the last several years, we need to have a timely record of unusual events on LCO, and now you will have the chance to help out. There are forms available for those who want to report dying fish, invasive aquatic plant species, algae blooms, ice on/off dates, loon sightings, and other events.

COLA'S LAND USE POLICY

COLA has developed a new [land use policy](#), addressing developmental pressures on LCO.

SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS

We'd like to spread the news of COLA's good people and good works throughout the upper Couderay River watershed. If you have friends or family on nearby lakes who would enjoy Short Ears Long Tales, [let us know](#).

Help COLA by sharing this newsletter with friends.

ARCHIVED ISSUES OF SHORT EARS, LONG TALE

Kathy Hanson is a free-lance reporter for the Sawyer County Gazette, the Sawyer County Field Editor for Our Wisconsin magazine, and Copy Editor for the Bayfield County Journal. She has also served as Staff Reporter, Business Feature Writer, Columnist, and Copy Editor for the Sawyer County Record.

COLA Mission: 1) to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little Lac Courte Oreilles, their shorelands and surrounding areas, while respecting the interests of property owners and the rights of the general public; and 2) to consider, study, survey and respond to issues deemed relevant by COLA's membership.

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