

MUSKY STOCKING:

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

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COMMENTARY

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By: Kirk Schnitker

Stocking muskellunge into new waters can be handled one of two ways. The first is to cautiously study the body of water being considered, look at the suitability and surrounding social and economic factors, make written proposals and receive public input. Then proceed if the stocking makes sense. The alternative is to stock because the local DNR fisheries people and musky fishermen want to do so. The former approach is one of caution as advised by fisheries biologists from Wisconsin and Michigan and the later is the approach that has been the norm and preference of too many DNR fisheries personnel.

If we back up a bit we recognize some important considerations:

- Minnesota is perceived by many to be *the* premiere musky fishery.
- Minnesota DNR studies show that up to 14% of Minnesota anglers have fished for muskellunge at some time. This percentage includes those who occasionally target muskellunge. Annually, it is said by some observers, that less than 5% of Minnesota anglers fish for muskies.
- 35% of Minnesota waters are currently managed for muskellunge, meaning waters they are stocked. This percentage does not include many waters not stocked but where muskellunge have migrated to from adjoining waters.
- Muskies are a non-native species to all but a few Minnesota waters and when stocked, they displace other fish species including the well heralded Northern Pike.
- After significant public input from many interest groups the Minnesota DNR implemented in 2008 a Long Range Plan (LPR) that significantly changed the process by which muskies can be stocked in new waters. Written reports, public notice and meetings are required and specific criteria must be considered before a new stocking can occur.
- In 2008 the Minnesota DNR top administration overturned its fisheries staff decision to stock muskellunge in Gull Lake. Local and state fisheries staff were aligned with pro-musky stocking people. DNR top administrator concluded the plan was ill advised.

Let's face it; the musky matter is one with special interests on all sides. There are those who want more and more musky waters, those who believe they have been overstocked and those who believe muskies are a fine species that need prudent management. Sportsman for Responsible Musky Management (SFRMM) is in this later group.

SFRMM was formed by responding to the DNR's arrogant approach to stocking Gull Lake. When questions were asked and reports requested concerned people were stonewalled. When studies and observations were noted from other fisheries biologists that conflicted with the Minnesota fisheries' plans, the reports were ignored and observations advising caution were disregarded. The Minnesota DNR fisheries approach had a cavalier, trust us, we're the experts and you have gall to question our plans. This was troubling especially in the sense that the cautions advised by many biologists from other states were disregarded.

Those biologists said use caution; we've stocked in some of the wrong lakes and overstocked in others. If the Minnesota DNR fisheries staff considered those learned views, they not once to SFRMM acknowledged them or conceded caution is well advised. This was troubling. When Northern Pike and SFRMM interests requested LRP pre-stocking criteria, written planning reports, public notice and meetings fisheries staff refused to insert such criteria that amounted to accountability. Fortunately top DNR administrators said study first, consider certain criteria, put it in writing and having public notice and meeting input is the right thing to do.

So what does all this mean? If the Minnesota DNR fisheries folks seek to stock muskies in your lake, work with them but understand they may lack the caution you may feel is proper. You must use the LRP to hold them accountable. You need to decide does it make biological, social and economic sense to approve or support the plan to stock muskies in your lake. What are the impacts of the stocking on your lake and those that are connected? One recent proposal to stock muskies in one lake and river all but ignored the fact that these fish easily swim and establish themselves elsewhere. This is the reason why we have muskies in many lakes where they have not been stocked. One must also ask, do I concede to the DNR and musky stocking proponents just to appease them? It's a reality that one of the first places DNR fisheries go to is lake associations to ask for their support to stock muskies. These are the same associations that are often asking DNR fisheries to stock walleyes and more walleyes. Should the association capitulate just to reach another objective? The answer is only when it is in the best interests of the resource and one never knows the best for the resource until all information is gathered, put in writing and scrutinized. If it makes sense then do it. If not, hold your ground and hold those that work for the public to the high standards we all should expect of ourselves. That standard is the best interest of the public and our resources.

Don't believe all that we or the DNR says. Read the studies on this website and scrutinize them and those of the DNR and draw your own conclusions. Use the LRP as the tool it is implemented for and insist its procedures be complied with. Only then can you know what is best for the public and the resource.