

Musky Stocking: The Knapp Study and DNR Bias Exposed

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A recent, widely distributed, DNR press release makes the claim that stocked Muskellunge do not affect other fish species in lakes where they are introduced. This press release needs to be viewed for what it is. A planned piece of propaganda designed to soften opposition to stocking Muskies in 5 additional waters throughout Minnesota. The lakes proposed for stocking are Roosevelt Lake in Cass and Crow Wing counties, Upper South Long Lake and Lower South Long Lake in Crow Wing County, and Tetonka Lake in LeSueur County and the Sauk River Chain of Lakes in Stearns County. With legitimate concerns about Muskellunge predation on other species leading the conversation against stocking muskies into new waters, I would have hoped that the DNR would have adopted a neutral, open minded position here rather than driving the conversation with a biased, predetermined outcome in mind. Maybe I am an idealist, but in a situation where the desires of one group of sportsmen are at odds with those of others, DNR transparency, openness and objective neutrality should be painstakingly pursued. In cases where the goals of Musky fishing groups are opposed to those of groups that target Northern Pike, Walleye and other species, this inherent DNR bias is in need of complete exposure. It is time to wash the windows and let Minnesota's angling population see what really lurks inside.

The Knapp study has been used as a vehicle to justify stocking muskies in this latest campaign. There are several other studies with different conclusions but we never hear about them. It would certainly make sense to analyze all positions and data before recommending major changes in fish management but when the goal is to stock, stock and stock some more, that kind of logic doesn't seem to have any importance. The Minnesota DNR has clearly chosen sides and the future of angling in our state may hang precariously in the balance.

The raw data of the Knapp study is what needs close examination. The conclusion that Muskies do not have a detrimental effect on other fish populations are simply not supported by the data. At the very least, the data suggests that there is certainly cause for concern. What it really tells us is that in the lakes studied, populations of other fish either went up, went down or stayed roughly the same after muskies were stocked. Nothing more, nothing less.

One problem that we see with this study is that it is based on the number of fish netted in a particular lake after Musky stocking took place as compared to the numbers found there before stocking. As we all know, these are only snapshots of particular moments in time and can in no way account for other factors that are in play such as changes in angling pressure, forage, habitat, water quality, competition, stocking, predation and the presence of "no harvest" slot limits. When we throw all of these factors into the mix, the scientific aspects of this study are greatly reduced in terms of accuracy. Now let's consider the actual study data. The facts are really quite simple. In lakes where pre Musky stocking data exists (the study is needlessly complicated with many lakes where no pre study data exists), the following results are noted:

In 35 lakes where Walleye were sampled, 11 showed Walleye population decline.

In 37 lakes where Perch were sampled, 15 showed Perch population decline.

In 34 lakes where Bluegill were sampled, 7 showed Bluegill population decline.

In 33 lakes where White Sucker were sampled, 18 showed White Sucker population decline.

In 26 lakes where Black crappies were sampled, 9 showed Black Crappie population decline.

In 12 lakes where Tulibee were sampled, 5 showed Tulibee population decline.

In 36 lakes where Northern Pike were sampled, 17 showed Pike population decline.

If you take a good look at these numbers, it is obvious that the study certainly does not support the statement that musky do not affect the population of other fish in a given lake. In fact it casts a great deal of doubt regarding the statement that these predators have no effect at all. What it does tell us is that there is really a reason to be concerned and that any future stocking of muskies into non native waters should be approached with extreme caution. The fact is that the DNR is so greatly driven by the desire to have the greatest Muskellunge fishery in the world that they consistently formulate management policy aimed at achieving that goal with little concern for the desires of anglers that have interest in maintaining viable populations of other species. I have news for the DNR. We already have the best musky fishery in the world and no further effort is needed when balanced against the potential for harm. Given that current Musky anglers comprise only 8% of the total angling population, continually favoring the desires of this small minority over the rights of others is outlandish and in need of reconsideration.

How about the claim that Muskellunge don't eat Walleye? Think of this seriously and without clouded judgment. If you are the king of the lake, measuring 50 inches or more with equally large caloric needs, you are going to eat what is available. A huge predator is not going to wait for a Sucker to come along if a nice Walleye is within striking distance. They eat what they can. That is how the food chain works. This concept was recently articulated in an issue of the Muskies Inc magazine where a story in that publication included the author's observations as well as his recommendations for what he considered to be the best Musky fishing lures. In fact this author, an underwater cameraman and Muskies Inc magazine contributing editor, had witnessed musky feeding heavily on walleye time and again. "I can't tell you how many times I've seen muskies stalking schools of walleyes. I think the amount of predation that occurs is vastly understated and understood. Muskies target walleye with great regularity. Walleye fishermen often report muskie attacking their catch as it's coming to the boat. I want to assure you this is neither an aberration nor a deviation from their normal diet. Muskie regularly follow, stalk and target walleyes. I've seen this many, many times" (Muskies Inc magazine, June 2007, p.30). Further evidence supporting the fact that Muskies eat Walleye comes again from Muskies Inc magazine. In yet another article, we find the following: "Recently, someone asked me "If you could have only one lure in your tackle box what would it be". Without hesitation I answered "Loke Walleye", and its true." (Muskies Inc magazine July, 2007)

Now let's take a good, unbiased look at a few dirty little secrets.

First consider the raw data again with regard to Walleye. In many lakes walleye are stocked. This fact is undisputed. Given that musky do eat Walleye, it begs the following question. How many Walleye must be stocked simply with the understanding that they are nothing more than food for Muskies? How many of our dollars are being converted into nothing more than high priced fish food? In fact the Knapp study itself includes this statement; "Though we did not attempt to separate the effects of Muskellunge from changes in Walleye stocking strategies, our data illustrate walleye populations can be maintained or improved in the presence of Muskellunge" (Knapp study, page 18). What this caveat is telling us is that the DNR has to aggressively stock walleye in order to retain or improve their population when Muskellunge are present. Predation on other species of fish is nothing more than collateral damage when musky stocking takes place. Let's be honest about what Muskies eat and make sure the citizens who pay the bill get the real information. Do we really want Muskellunge introduced into more and more bodies of water knowing that the data supports a position of complete caution? Once you put them in, they cannot be taken out.

Second consider the timing of the study data. I am unable to see anywhere in the study when these post musky stocking numbers were gathered. Given that Muskies grow slowly and take the better part of a decade to reach full predatory size, it certainly makes no sense to study their effect on a particular lake a few years after they have been introduced. They just have not had enough time to grow large enough to effect the balance in that lake. When they are full size, that is a completely different dynamic. Add to that the fact that musky are a species targeted mainly by sport fishermen and there is additional cause for concern. What this means is that in a musky fishing culture that insists on "catch and release" these large predators are rarely harvested thus exacerbating the potential for problems. The new 48" minimum harvest size for Muskellunge statewide, as well as the prevailing "catch and release" mentality, insures that lakes will soon be bulging with these hungry predators.

The Knapp study, according to its own disclaimers, is not able to be scientifically applied to other bodies of water but the DNR continues to ignore this fact. "This study was intended to evaluate past management with a simple before and after muskellunge introduction comparison in all of the stocked lakes. Precisely predicting the response of other Minnesota lakes to muskellunge stocking using these data is not technically feasible because of the natural variation inherent in all wild fish populations" (Knapp study, page 17). If the study is not reliable in the prediction of the results of Muskellunge stocking in other lakes, why is the DNR holding it up as a glowing example of how musky stocking will not affect existing fish populations in the newly proposed lakes? I will tell you why. Because, in their biased, result oriented battle plan, they believe that nobody will read the study and simply accept their conclusions as facts. The truth is out, the light is shining in and folks are beginning to look.

Our Minnesota DNR has been biased against the desires of many of its constituents long enough. It is time for change. Let's have a DNR that is open about analyzing all data available rather than grabbing one piece that seems to support its plans and then extrapolating it further hoping that nobody will take a serious look at what is really going on. We can all take a look at the data ourselves and as responsible sportsmen and women we are obliged to do so. The website

www.muskytroubles.com has all the information needed including many other studies published in their entirety rather than snippets and conclusions that are not necessarily supported by facts. Take a look and draw your own conclusions about putting more Muskies into these additional bodies of water. It is all there waiting. Then use your own powers of reasoning to come to the right conclusions. Currently 35% of Minnesota's lake acreage is actively managed for and stocked with Muskies. This does not include waters where they have previously occurred. It is time to wake up and not accept anything as stated with regard to musky stocking. Let's make sure that the facts dictate policy rather than having it driven by the desires of one minority group of anglers. How much is enough, and at what cost?