

Lake Erie Angling - Past, Present, and Future.

Roger L. Knight¹ (Roger.Knight@dnr.state.oh.us), D.L. Johnson¹, and T. J. Bader². ¹Ohio Division of Wildlife, Sandusky Fish Research Unit, 305 E. Shoreline Drive, Sandusky, OH 44870, and ²Fairport Fish Research Unit, 421 High St., Fairport Harbor, OH 44077.

Angling on Lake Erie and tributaries has occurred since early human settlement. Fishing effort was minimal (by modern standards) until the mid-1900s. Key fish species included walleyes, lake sturgeon, and black bass that were seasonally available to shore-based fisheries along the coastal margin and tributaries. Boat angling increased as the region became industrialized but never attained levels evidenced in commercial fisheries. Blue-pike and yellow perch were targeted species of boat anglers, particularly in the central basin. Like commercial fisheries, angling was likely reduced by the 1960s, due to population collapses of walleyes and blue-pike, and mercury contamination of fish flesh by the onset of the 1970s. Improved habitat, stemming from the Clean Water Act of 1972, coupled with newly-established interagency fisheries management for walleyes, led to unprecedented recovery of walleye stocks and an associated sport fishery. Creel assessments indicated that fishing effort on walleyes, the predominant targeted species, increased from 623,000 hours in the western and central basins during 1975 to nearly 15 million hours in 1988. Angling effort declined to about 6 million hours annually in the 1990s. A charter-boat fishery also developed, primarily in Ohio waters, and increased from about 30 licensed operators in 1975 to over 1,200 in 1990 and remained above 1,000 through the 1990s. The economic benefit of the sport fisheries in Lake Erie has been estimated at several hundred to over a billion dollars annually. Most anglers currently target walleye, yellow perch, and smallmouth bass (in order), with increased effort directed at smallmouth bass in recent years. Future levels of angling on Lake Erie will be affected by social-economic as well as biological factors.