Native Fish Issues in the Flathead Watershed

Today, Flathead Lake, the Flathead watershed and it's native fish species continue to face diverse hardships and threats from pollution, land use, invasive species, hydro-electric dam operations, a warming climate and other adverse impacts. Native bull trout are currently listed as *Threatened* under the Endangered Species Act. Westslope Cutthroat are listed as a *Species of Special Concern* under the ESA. Current Flathead bull trout populations continue to fail to meet Bull Trout Recovery Criteria set by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Recent Impacts on Native Fish

- Three hydroelectric dams, on the Swan River, the South Fork Flathead River, and Kerr Dam on the mainstem affect flow and temperature regimes throughout the basin.
- 1968: Opossum shrimp (Mysis relicta) were introduced by fisheries managers in hopes of increasing growth rates of the once abundant kokanee salmon. Unexpected interactions caused a collapse of the kokanee population.
- 1999: Introduced lake trout were estimated at 200,000 catchable-sized fish (14+ inches) in Flathead Lake. By 2009, that population had more than doubled.
- 2006: Predaceous lake trout became established in Swan Lake, the Swan River, and in Glacier National Park lakes from the Middle and North Forks Flathead River.
- 2006: Illegally introduced northern pike in the upper Flathead River, now number 1,200 -1,300 fish and are estimated to consume 8 metric tons of fish annually, including 13,000 westslope cutthroat and 3,500 bull trout.[i]
- 2009: Native bull trout populations in Flathead Lake and the North and Middle Forks of the Flathead River are currently estimated are at only 3,000 - 4,000 fish.

Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-Management Plan:

The plan was cooperatively created in 1999 by MT Fish Wildlife and Park and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes after extensive public scoping.

The following management plan goals were established:

- Increase and protect native trout populations (bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout).
- Balance tradeoffs between native species conservation and non native species reduction to maintain a viable recreational/subsistence fishery.
- Protect the high quality water and habitat characteristics of Flathead Lake and its watershed.

The primary means currently being used to control the lake trout population are general angling and the Mack Days Fishing Contests in Spring and Fall.

The goal of increasing native trout populations and reducing the non-native fish in the Flathead Basin has failed to be met in any of the nine years that the current co-management plan has been in effect.

Economic impacts of Guided fishing trips on lakes and rivers:

Direct economic impact of outfitted fishing trips in Montana was just over $34 millions dollars (2005 report released in 2007).

56% of all guided fishing trips take place on rivers.
26% of all guided fishing trips take place on lakes
18% of all guided fishing trips take place on reservoirs.
(Note: Flathead Lake is not considered a reservoir).[ii]

Flathead Valley Trout Unlimited Board position on native fish recovery in the Flathead Watershed:

The board of Flathead Valley Trout Unlimited supports a continuation of the Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-Management Plan in order to recover native bull trout and cutthroat populations. Current, angling opportunities in the Flathead watershed for native bull trout and westslope cutthroat are severely limited due to past and present conditions. The board supports moving forward with an inclusive process to define future actions to restore native fishes using NEPA and Environmental Assessment strategies.

Please visit www.flatheadtu.org for additional information and a timeline history of issues affecting native fish species in the Flathead.

[i] Peer-reviewed Pike Consumption Report 2006. Results published in *Journal of North American Fisheries* 2008.

[ii] Peer reviewed academically-defensible Outfitter Guide Expenditure Report and Flathead and Lake County Visitor Expenditure Reports prepared by the Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research at U of MT Dept. of Forestry.