



PO Box 7186 Missoula, MT 59807 (406) 543-0054

PO Box 638 Kalispell, MT 59903 (406) 260-1198

What anglers should know about Flathead Lake, lake trout, and native trout

Are lake trout the main reason native bull trout and cutthroat trout are disappearing from Flathead Lake and the Flathead River and its Middle and North forks?

Yes. Biologists agree that the primary culprit in the precipitous decline in bull trout and cutthroat trout in the Flathead system the last 20 years is predation from an expanding population of non-native lake trout in Flathead Lake.

How can lake trout in Flathead Lake be harming bull and cutthroat trout in the river?

Biologists have long known that most of the bull trout and a portion of the cutthroat trout found in the main Flathead River, as well as in its North and Middle Forks, are migratory and they spend part of their lives in Flathead Lake. They move to the river to spawn and spend the first few years of their lives rearing in tributaries, before descending to the lake where they fall prey to or are otherwise outcompeted by voracious lake trout.

So, what is the status of bull trout and cutthroat trout in the Flathead system?

Based on annual counts of spawning redds and historical angling data, it is clear that the bull trout population is a fraction of what it was historically. This is a primary reason the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed this fish species as "threatened." Absolute numbers on cutthroats are hard to come by, but based on limited field data and anecdotal information it appears their numbers are also drastically reduced.

But isn't habitat degradation the main reason these fish are disappearing?

Habitat loss has contributed to reductions of both fish in the past. However, land-use practices have improved in recent decades and the impacts are substantially less. Today, bull trout and cutthroat numbers have even plummeted in streams in protected wilderness and Glacier National Park where habitat is pristine, indicating that lake trout predation in the connected lake habitat is severe.

But aren't Montana FWP and the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes reducing lake trout numbers by encouraging anglers to harvest the fish and through the twice-a-year Mack Days derbies?

Yes, general angling and derbies have removed, on average, about 45,000 lake trout a year from Flathead Lake, but the evidence does not indicate that level of removal has reduced lake trout numbers

to date. Further, scientific studies of bull trout and cutthroat trout indicate this level of harvest isn't producing a corresponding increase in bull and cutthroat numbers.

Are other methods of lake trout removal are being considered?

In their evaluation of new lake trout removal strategies for their cooperative fishery management plan for Flathead Lake, State and Tribal biologists plan on examining the potential for creating additional incentives for anglers to catch and keep lake trout, such as bounties. Another idea would be to require anglers to keep all lake trout they catch. However, it appears the most reliable way to reduce lake trout numbers could be the use of carefully deployed gillnets or traps.

Are the Tribes and FWP going to wipe out all the lake trout, eliminating opportunities to fish for this species?

Hardly. The best current estimate indicates there are more than 400,000 catchable-sized lake trout in Flathead Lake. The idea is to reduce that number, initially by at least 25 percent, thereby reducing the predation pressure on cutthroat trout and bull trout. There are thought to be only an estimated 2,500-3,500 adult bull trout using the 122,500 acre lake. The goal would be to increase native fish populations, while preserving reasonable angling opportunities for lake trout and other non-native sportfish.

What does Trout Unlimited think should be done to help recover bull and cutthroat trout in the Flathead Lake and River system?

We are encouraging the Tribes and FWP to evaluate and seriously consider employing an experimental gillnetting program, perhaps supplemented with traps, to increase mortality of lake trout in Flathead Lake. This is the Tribes' recommended approach in their initial pilot project. We support this because when carefully designed – including measures that protect bull trout from accidentally being caught – and coupled with rigorous population monitoring and research, it could occur with minimal conflicts. The target levels of lake trout removal that the Tribes are suggesting will begin to reduce predation pressure on native fish, while still ensuring plenty of lake trout are available for anglers. Eleven of 12 top scientists, most with experience studying lake trout, concluded in a 1997 review of alternatives that a carefully designed netting program had the highest probability of success for recovering bull trout and cutthroat trout populations.

What would occur if lake trout removal efforts were curtailed?

Most biologists conclude that bull trout numbers would eventually dwindle to levels that would likely lead to extinction, at least the migratory fish that use the lake. Loss of this population would be a tremendous blow to bull trout population diversity within the range of the species. Cutthroats would probably be, at best, an incidental but rare species in the lake. Montanans would thus never again be able to fish for bull trout, or perhaps eventually even cutthroat trout in Flathead Lake or the river system, a tradition that was once a mainstay for generations of anglers. Though lake trout would probably remain abundant in Flathead Lake, it's possible the population density would produce a fishery dominated by stunted individuals. As it is, growth rates and body condition of fish today are already below the norm. Recreational angling in the river, and possibly the lake, would be much less than it has been historically.