

Background

“How are the fish in my lake doing?” We need this answer to set appropriate fishing regulations, to understand and correct any problems with fish habitat, and to guard against invasive species. A healthy fish population and fish community means we can all enjoy the benefits of sustainable fisheries and healthy ecosystems. A standard method of assessing the status of fish populations is necessary to allow comparisons of fish sustainability across the years at a lake, and to compare to other lakes. In Alberta, we use an accepted standard of index netting for lake fisheries assessment. This method provides the necessary data on fish abundance, biological data (such as age and sex), and species diversity to assess sustainability.

Fall Index Netting (FIN)

Alberta Environment and Parks monitor Walleye and Northern Pike populations using standardized index netting (Morgan, 2002). Fall index netting occurs during late summer and fall when water temperatures are 10-15 °C. Standardized multi-mesh gill nets are set at random locations between 2 and 15 metres deep, set for 21-27 hours (i.e., a net-night), and then reset in new random locations. At Skeleton Lake in 2015, a half-length variation of the standard index net was used, balancing precision of the catch rates with reduced sampling effort. Information from Yellow Perch, Lake Whitefish, Burbot, minnow, and sucker species are also collected. The information collected from each fish includes length, weight, age, gender, and maturity. After sampling, if fish are appropriate for human consumption, Alberta biologists provide the fish to local Indigenous peoples or to persons on approved subsistence lists. Typically, a tiny proportion of the lake’s fish population (usually less than 1 or 2%) are killed in this sampling.

How is this information used?

Catch rates (i.e., number of fish captured per net-night) of Walleye and Northern Pike are an index of the populations’ abundance, with higher catch rates meaning there are more fish in the lake. The abundance of adult fish is compared to the standardized thresholds for 5 broad categories of risk to the long-term sustainability of the fish population, with higher densities of fish having lower risk (Table 1). The sizes and age of fish also tell us if problems with overharvest (e.g. too few fish living to old age) or habitat (e.g., poor spawning success) are a concern. Biologists use this information, as well as a variety of data on water quality, access, development, and habitat threats as part of Alberta’s Fish Sustainability Index (FSI).

The Fisheries Management Objective for most Alberta fisheries is **long-term sustainability**, shown by the red lines on the graphs below. Achieving this objective uses the netting data and the FSI to determine the most appropriate sport fishing regulations for a lake. This landscape-level assessment allows for consistent, broad temporal comparisons of fish sustainability and status. For more information please see Alberta’s FIN and FSI websites,

- <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/fisheries-management/fall-index-netting/default.aspx>
- <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/fisheries-management/fish-sustainability-index/default.aspx>

Table 1 – Alberta’s Fish Sustainability Index risk thresholds for Walleye and Pike using the standardized Fall Index Net (FIN) method. **Note:** Thresholds align with species management frameworks.

Mature Walleyes / 1/2 net	Mature Pike / 1/2 net	Risk to Sustainability
>14.5	>10.9	Very Low
10.2-14.5	7.7-10.9	Low
7.3-10.1	5.5-7.6	Moderate
2.9-7.2	2.2-5.4	High
<2.9	<2.2	Very High

Results of the 2015 FIN at Skeleton Lake

Skeleton Lake (875 ha) is located approximately 52 km west from the town of Lac La Biche. From September 21 to 24, 2015, 16 ½ length nets captured 79 Cisco, 46 Lake Whitefish, 118 Northern Pike, 130 Walleye, 21 White Suckers, and 128 Yellow Perch.

Walleye

The mean catch rate of Walleyes was 8.1/ ½ net-night. The catch rates of mature (Figure 1) and immature Walleye were 7.1/ ½ net-night and 1.1/ ½ net-night, respectively. The corresponding FSI score for the current mature density of stocked Walleye was assessed at **high risk to moderate risk**.

The length distribution shows very weak recruitment, but a strong pulse of larger fish (Figure 2). These may be a single, unusually strong pulse of recruits from the walleye stocked in the 1990s.

The 2015 FIN sample represented approximately 1.7% of the estimated mature Walleye population size.

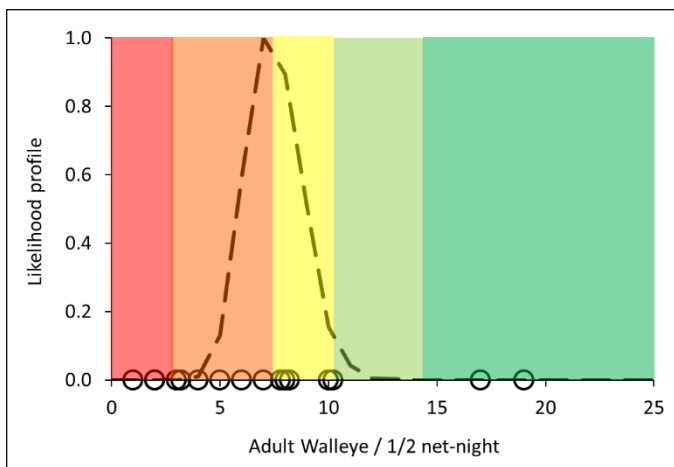


Figure 1 - The FIN catch rate of mature Walleyes from Skeleton Lake, 2015. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (7.1 fish/ ½ net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=16 nets).

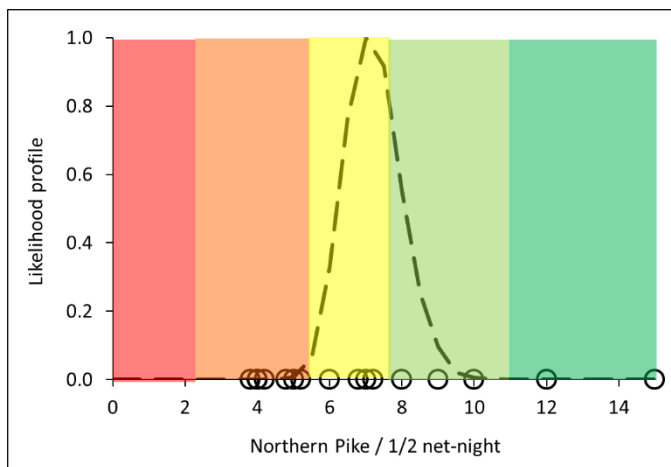


Figure 3 - The FIN catch rate of mature Northern Pike from Skeleton Lake, 2015. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (7.0 fish/ ½ net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=16 nets).

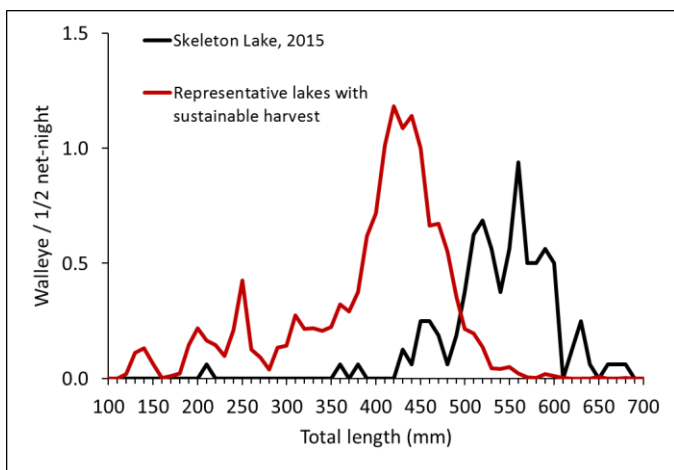


Figure 2 - FIN sample of showing size of Walleyes from Skeleton Lake, 2015. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Walleye from 5 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Walleye.

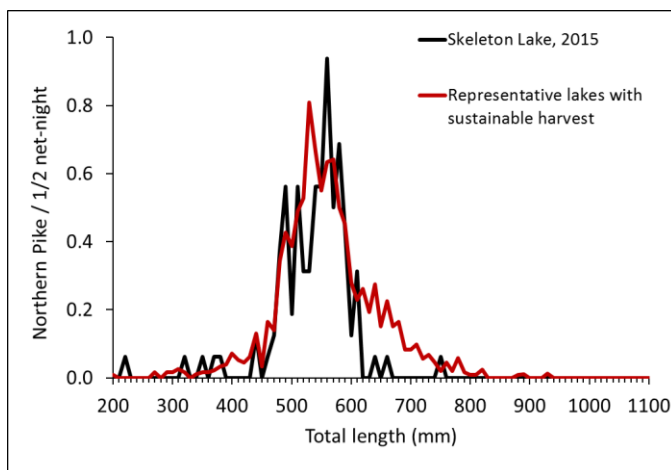


Figure 4 - FIN sample showing size of Northern Pike from Skeleton Lake, 2015. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Pike from 6 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Pike.

Northern Pike

The mean catch rate of mature Northern Pike was 7.0/ ½ net-night (Figure 3). The corresponding FSI score for the current mature density of Northern Pike was assessed at the border of **moderate risk** to **low risk**.

The length distribution shows moderate recruitment with abundant Northern Pike 500 to 600 mm, but severe truncation of fish larger than 600 mm (Figure 4).

The 2015 FIN sample represented approximately 0.1% of the estimated mature Northern Pike population size.

Summary

The previous FIN assessments on Skeleton Lake (2004, 2010) indicated a strong pulse of walleye. However, this pulse failed to create subsequent recruited year-classes. The

restoration of a self-sustaining Walleye population does not appear to be successful. Careful conservation-based management is therefore necessary, dependant on the management objective.

A strong pulse of Pike appears to be supporting this fishery, but size truncation suggests heavy harvest pressure. This appears to be a relatively low-quality (i.e., small fish), but sustainably harvested pike fishery. Options to improve the fishing quality, while maintaining a sustainability objective, seem possible.

Literature

Morgan, G.E. 2002. Manual of Instructions-Fall Walleye Index Netting. Percid Community Synthesis, Diagnostics and Sampling Standards Working Group. Laurentian University, Sudbury Ontario.