

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. 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 management goal for most Alberta fisheries is **long-term sustainability**, shown by the red lines on the graphs below.

Achieving this goal 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 / net | Mature Pike / net | Risk to Sustainability |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| >29.0 | >21.8 | Very Low |
| 20.3-29.0 | 15.3-21.8 | Low |
| 14.5-20.2 | 10.9-15.2 | Moderate |
| 5.8-14.4 | 4.4-10.8 | High |
| <5.8 | <4.4 | Very High |

Results of the 2016 FIN at Lac La Nonne

Lac La Nonne (1292 ha) is located 70 km northwest from the city of Edmonton. From September 13-15, 2016, six gill nets captured 5 Lake Whitefish, 43 Northern Pike, 1 Spottail Shiner, 2 Trout-Perch, 39 Walleye, and 31 Yellow Perch, from Lac La Nonne.

Walleye

The mean catch rate of Walleyes was 6.5/net-night. The catch rates of mature (Figure 1) and immature Walleye were 1.8/net-night and 4.5/net-night, respectively. The corresponding FSI score for the current mature density of Walleye was assessed at **very high risk**.

In the winter of 2015, a severe winter kill affected all fish species in Lac La Nonne. The length distribution shows strong recruitment, and a severe reduction in the abundance of Walleye larger than 320 mm that were present in the 2014 FIN assessment (Figure 2).

The 2016 FIN sample represented approximately 0.9% of the estimated Walleye population size.

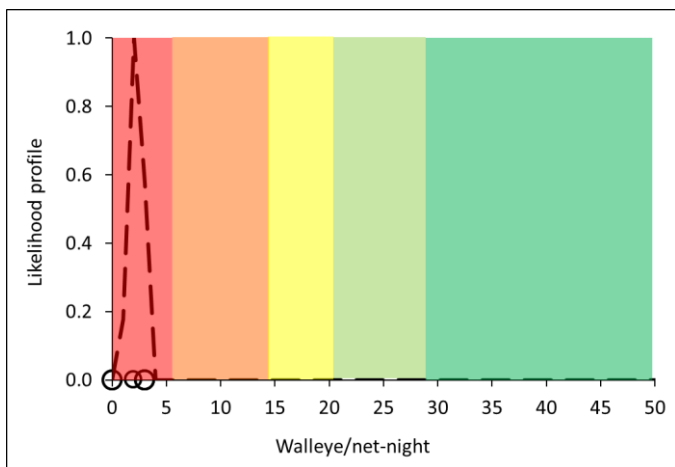


Figure 1 - The FIN catch rate of mature Walleyes from Lac La Nonne, 2016. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (1.8/fish/net-night), with net individual data as hollow circles (n=6 nets).

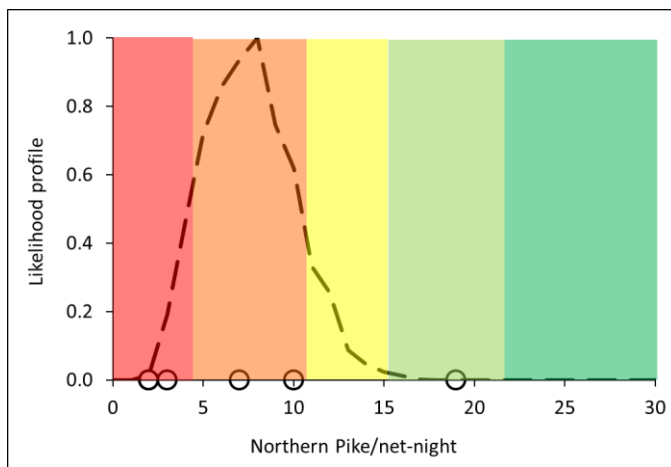


Figure 3 - The FIN catch rate of mature Northern Pike from Lac La Nonne, 2016. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (7.2 fish/net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=6 nets).

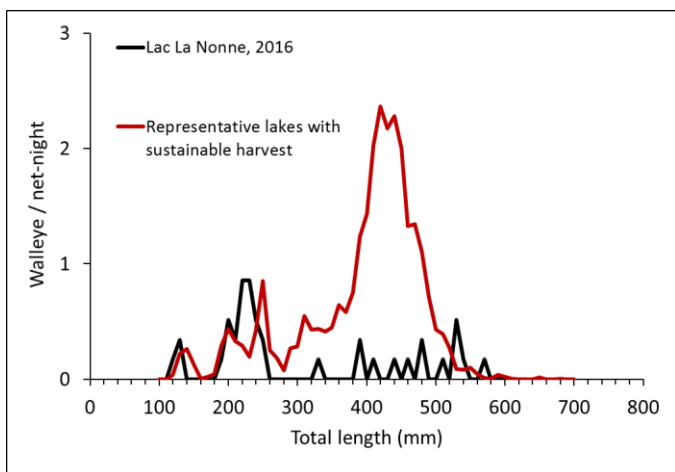


Figure 2 – FIN sample of showing size of Walleyes from Lac La Nonne, 2016. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Walleye from 5 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Walleye.

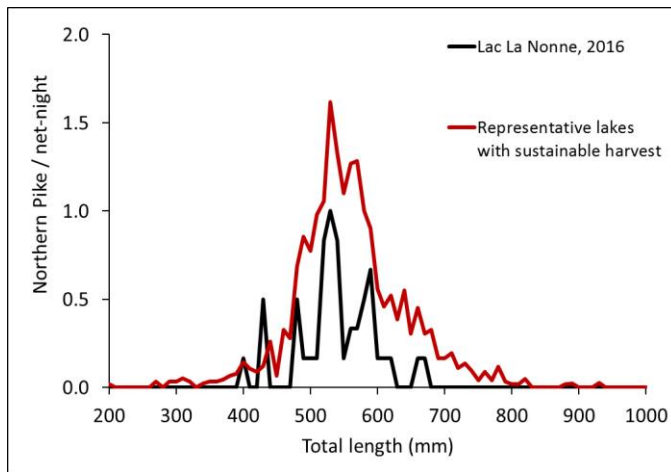


Figure 4 – FIN sample showing size of Northern Pike from Lac La Nonne, 2016. The red line indicates the average length distribution of pike from 6 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of pike.

Northern Pike

The mean catch rate of mature Northern pike was 7.2/net-night (Figure 3). The corresponding FSI score for the mature density of Northern Pike was assessed at **high risk**.

The 2015 winter kill seems to have had less of an adverse affect on Northern Pike in Lac La Nonne. The length distribution shows poor recruitment, and a moderate abundance of 480-670 mm Pike (Figure 4), when compared to the 2014 FIN Summary.

The 2016 FIN sample represented approximately 0.2% of the estimated Northern Pike population size.

Summary

The FIN assessments in 2008, 2012 and 2014 had corresponding FSI statuses of mature Walleye that varied between **high risk** to **low risk**. A severe winter kill in 2015

resulted in the population being assessed at **very high risk** in 2016. Dependant on the management objectives, conservation-based management is necessary for this fishery to attain long-term sustainability.

The 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2016 assessments indicated the corresponding FSI status of Northern Pike has remained at **high risk**. The 2105 winter kill appears to have reduced the abundance of Pike slightly. For long-term sustainability, conservation-based management is necessary, dependant on the management objective.

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.