

Sturgeon Lake FIN Summary

2020

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,

- <https://www.alberta.ca/fall-index-netting.aspx>
- <https://www.alberta.ca/fish-sustainability-index-overview.aspx>

Table 1 – Alberta’s Fish Sustainability Index risk thresholds for Walleye and Northern 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 2020 FIN at Sturgeon Lake

Sturgeon Lake (4850 ha) is located approximately 83 km east from the city of Grande Prairie. From September 29 to October 1, 8 nets captured 32 Lake Whitefish, 21 Northern Pike, 299 Walleyes and 10 White Suckers.

Walleye

The mean catch rate of Walleyes was 37.4/net-night. The catch rates of mature (Figure 1) and immature Walleyes were 33.4/net-night and 4.0/net-night, respectively. The corresponding FSI score for the current mature density of Walleyes was assessed at **very low** risk.

The length distribution shows sporadic recruitment however very strong abundances of 280 mm to 470 mm Walleyes and severe truncation of fish larger than 480 mm (Figure 2).

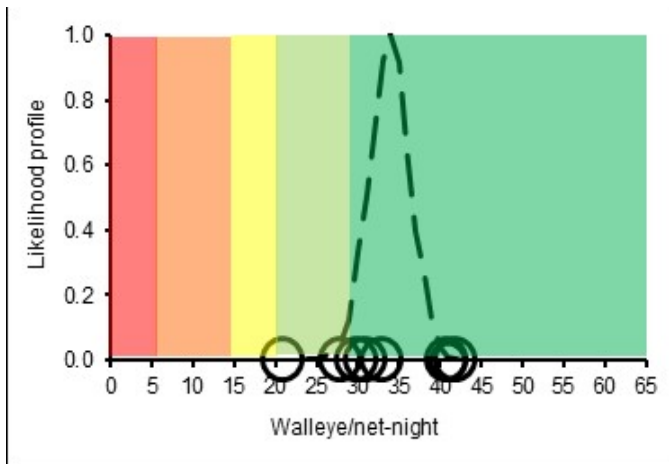


Figure 1 - The FIN catch rate of mature Walleyes from Sturgeon Lake, 2020. Dashed line is the mean catch rate (33.4 fish/ net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=8 nets).

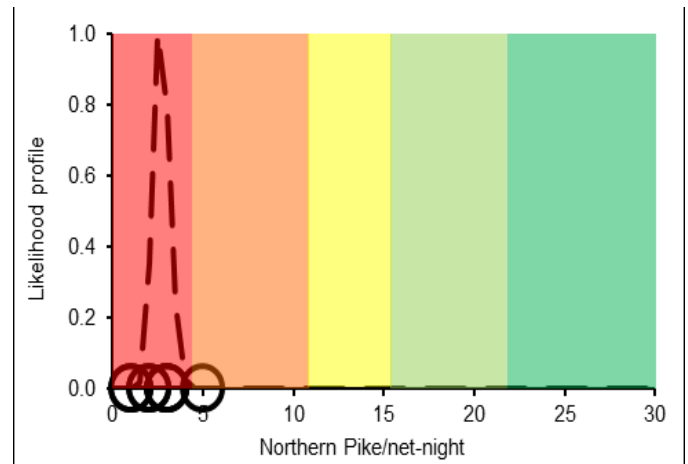


Figure 3 - The FIN catch rate of mature Northern Pike from Sturgeon Lake, 2020. Dashed line is the mean catch rate (2.5 fish/ net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=8 nets).

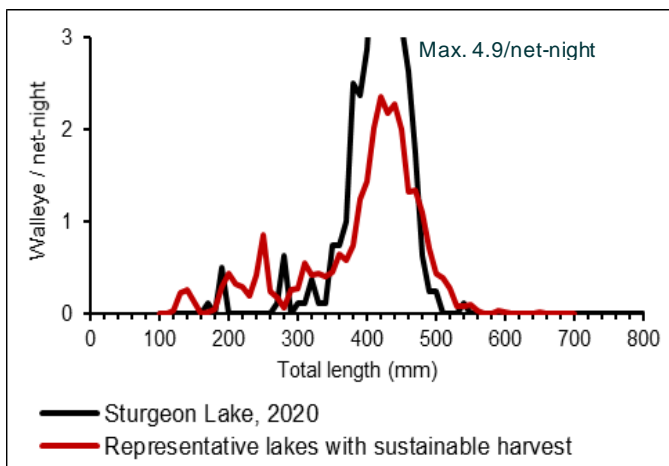


Figure 2 – FIN sample showing size of Walleyes from Sturgeon Lake, 2020. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Walleye from 5 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Walleye.

The 2020 FIN sample represented approximately 0.3% of the estimated mature Walleye population size.

Northern Pike

The mean catch rate of mature Northern Pike was 2.5/ net-night (3 adults; Figure 3). The corresponding FSI score for the current mature density of Northern Pike was assessed at **very high** risk.

The length distribution shows no recruitment, a very low abundance of 430 mm to 590 mm fish and individual large pike (i.e., 830 mm; Figure 3).

The 2020 FIN sample represented approximately 0.1% of the estimated mature Northern Pike population size.

Summary

Since the 2013 and 2017 FIN assessments, the status of Walleye has remained at a **very low** risk category. To ensure the sustainability of this population and fishery, conservation-based management is necessary

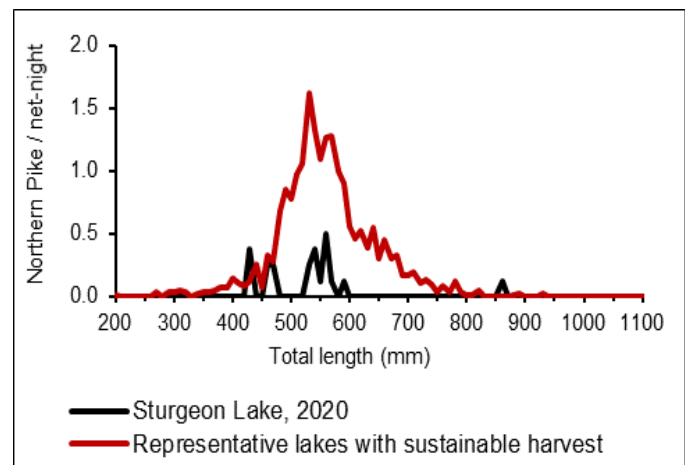


Figure 4 – FIN sample showing size of Northern Pike from Sturgeon Lake, 2020. The red line indicates the average length distribution of pike from 6 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of pike.

to support the sustainable harvest management objective.

Since the 2013 and 2017 assessments, the status of Northern Pike has remained at a **very high** risk status. Based on the management objective, strict conservation-based management is required to recover this population and fishery.

A slot harvest regulation is being evaluated for Walleyes at Sturgeon Lake. Alberta Fish and Wildlife will report on its performance as survey results are available.

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.