

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 Lac La Biche 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 Lac La Biche

Lac La Biche (23649 ha) is located approximately 160 km northeast from the city of Edmonton. From September 13 to 18, sixteen ½ length nets captured 30 Cisco, 17 Lake Whitefish, 48 Northern Pike, 15 Sucker species, 231 Walleye, and 33 Yellow Perch.

Walleye

The mean catch rate of Walleyes at this stocked fishery was 14.4/ ½ net-night. The catch rates of mature (Figure 1) and immature Walleye were 10.6/ ½ net-night and 3.8/ ½ net-night, respectively. Though the current density of adult Walleye is moderate risk to low risk, the mature Walleye in Lac La Biche are stocked and are not naturally sustaining.

The length distribution shows unstable and very weak recruitment of the first naturally produced generations of Walleye, but with very abundant large stocked fish (Figure 2).

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

Northern Pike

The mean catch rate of mature Northern Pike was 2.9/ ½ net-night (Figure 3). The corresponding FSI score for the current

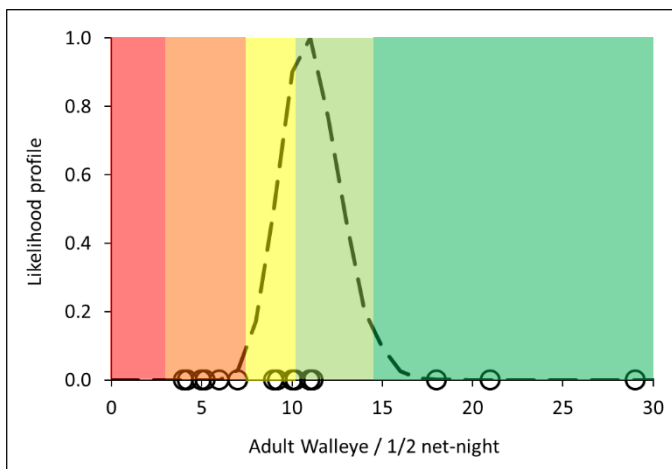


Figure 1 - The FIN catch rate of mature Walleyes from Lac La Biche, 2015. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (10.6 fish/ ½ net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=16 nets).

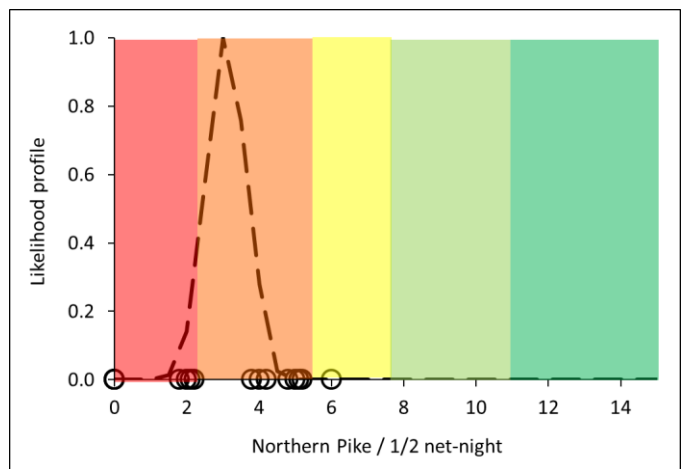


Figure 3 - The FIN catch rate of Northern Pike from Lac La Biche, 2015. Dashed line is the mean likelihood catch rate (2.9 fish/ ½ net-night), with individual net data as hollow circles (n=16 nets).

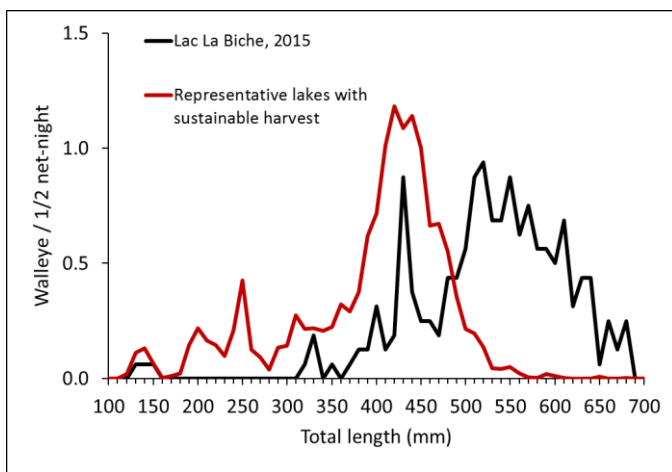


Figure 2 – FIN sample of showing size of Walleyes from Lac La Biche, 2015. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Walleye from 5 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Walleye.

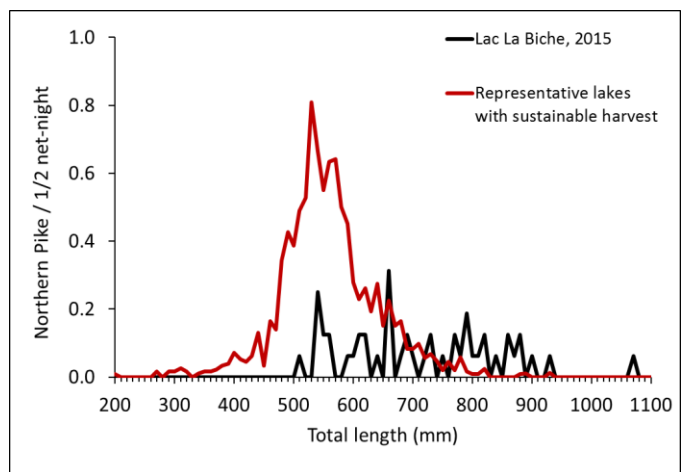


Figure 4 – FIN sample showing size of Northern Pike from Lac La Biche, 2015. The red line indicates the average length distribution of Pike from 6 Alberta lakes supporting long-term sustainable harvests of Pike.

mature density of Northern Pike was assessed at **high risk**.

The length distribution shows no recruitment of Northern Pike, with poor densities of moderate-sized Pike, but with good representation of a larger fish (Figure 4).

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

Summary

The 2015 FIN indicated the stocked Walleye adult density have a corresponding **moderate risk to low risk** status, with very large fish. The management objective for this lake is to achieve long-term sustainability. This will require an adult population of naturally-recruited Walleye, therefore the FSI status is **very high risk**. To achieve the objective, several

more years of strong natural recruitment are necessary. Conservation-oriented management therefore remains necessary, and anglers should value the high-quality fishery on large stocked Walleye.

The annual FIN assessments on Lac La Biche from 2010 to 2015 show the density of mature Northern Pike having corresponding FSI statuses ranging from **high risk to very high risk**, therefore conservation-focused 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.