

ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS & HUNTERS

P.O. Box 2800, 4601 Guthrie Drive, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 8L5
Phone: (705) 748.6324 • Fax: (705) 748.9577 • Visit: www.ofah.org • Email: ofah@ofah.org



Ontario Conservation Centre

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Joffre Côté
MNRF - ROD - Southern Region - Kemptville Work Centre
10-1 Campus Drive
Kemptville, Ontario
K0G 1J0

Subject: Temporary Fish Sanctuaries – Opinicon Lake and Charleston Lake

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) is Ontario's largest, non-profit, fish and wildlife conservation-based organization, representing 100,000 members, subscribers and supporters, and 725 member clubs. In cooperation with several other agencies and academic institutions, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) is proposing to implement temporary fish sanctuaries on Opinicon and Charleston Lakes for the 2024/25 fishing seasons to support long-term bass nesting and population recruitment research. Although the OFAH is supportive of the study, we would like to draw attention to recommendations provided in previous research done on Opinicon Lake and explore other solutions for bass management (if necessary).

Future fisheries management considerations

The OFAH supports the temporary fish sanctuary study for both Opinicon and Charleston Lakes. However, it should be noted that our support is for the latest proposal and not an endorsement of the specific recommendations made by the Philipp et al. (2022) study, wherein the authors believe the current seasonal closure strategy should be replaced with substantially larger, long-term fishing sanctuaries (protecting between thirty to seventy percent of shoreline areas).

While the Philipp et al. (2022) study is the driving force behind the latest proposal, there is a considerable difference between researching temporary fish sanctuaries compared to fully implementing these extreme measures. That said, the potential for the same or similar recommendations to be brought forward at a later stage is a definite possibility. In the following sections, we describe several approaches which may help to mitigate the present sustainability concerns without significantly impacting angler opportunity and explore some of the limitations of using sanctuaries as the sole solution.

Creating solutions without limiting angler opportunity

Over the years, the OFAH has worked with a variety of local governments and organizations from across the province to develop angler-friendly solutions to a diversity of issues. Along the Ganaraska River in the Town of Port Hope, for example, a working group of stakeholders including the OFAH was established to help address unwanted behaviour (i.e., illegal fishing, littering, noise). Through responsible angling videos, custom signage, education, outreach, and awareness campaigns, and coordinated strategic enforcement blitzes, the group was able to achieve significant reduction in illegal activities and other nuisance behaviours along the river.

These community-based solutions require a high degree of buy-in from members of the public and anglers. In “Peer pressure on the riverbank: Assessing catch-and-release anglers' willingness to sanction others' (bad) behavior,” Guckian et al. (2017) provides insight into social pressure anglers can put on others for the adoption of best practices and the promotion of good fishing ethics. Angling clubs, online forums, and social media platforms can be used to foster better behaviour; the FMZ 18 Advisory Council and local cottage associations could be leveraged in the same way. Accessible and visible campaigns and programs that direct people to “who to contact” (e.g., MNR Tips Hotline, Crime Stoppers) and promote the social and ecological consequences of catching fish out of season could help achieve conservation goals and objectives.

Enforcement

With respect to sanctuaries, it is important to note that defining/delineating invisible boundaries along shoreline areas will be difficult for anglers to understand (i.e., where fishing is permitted/prohibited) and enforcing these areas would require significant oversight by field officers during the sanctuary periods. This would inevitably complicate the regulations, which many anglers already described as being too complex, and has the potential to stifle recruitment and retention of new anglers. Greater enforcement presence, strategic planning, and other initiatives (e.g., enforcement blitzes, hidden surveillance projects) would go a long way in addressing out-of-season fishing without necessitating shoreline sanctuaries.

Ultimately, neither approach can be successful without sufficient enforcement presence on the landscape. However, if the belief is that overlapping seasons creates unenforceable situations, then creating numerous area-based closures throughout the lake would surely be more challenging to enforce. Considering how few conservation officers are presently employed by the province, the OFAH feels that it would be important to emphasize the need to drastically increase enforcement resources alongside any recommendations for the future.

Fishing seasons for other sportfish

Conservation concerns related to incidental and illegal fishing are not new to the OFAH. In our 2020 feedback to the MNR's proposed fishing season in FMZ 20 (Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River) we drew attention to the early bass season overlapping the sensitive spawning periods of other valuable sportfish such as Walleye and Northern Pike.

Fishing during the open season of one species, while another season remains closed, is a common practice throughout Ontario. For this reason, it may not be practical to view sanctuaries as a solution on the larger scale. Considering the sheer number of overlaps which exist, especially when accounting for year-round opportunities (e.g., many stocked fisheries; Yellow Perch, sunfish, and crappie seasons), applying this approach consistently would eliminate a substantial portion of existing angling opportunities. As such, a lack of enforcement should not be used as rationale for area-based closures, or we will see a regulatory system that severely restricts access.

Closing remarks

Determining a scientific correlation between hook wounding rates and reproductive success, like in the 2022 study done by Philipp et al., is an important part of the conversation but whether this concern is having a lakewide population-level impact is uncertain. During or outside the pandemic, angling effort has not been quantified on Opinicon or Charleston Lakes; moreover, this type of lake-specific data is no longer collected and has not been collected for decades in the Kemptville-Kingston District. As we see it, leveraging partnerships to help shed light on fishing pressure and gathering other creel-related information would be more valuable to the Ministry and the management of these fisheries.

The OFAH is supportive of the proposed study on Opinicon and Charleston Lakes, exploring the potential impacts of limited and temporary fish sanctuaries, but encourages the researchers and MNR to seek out alternative management strategies for bass (if necessary) in the future. The OFAH would gladly work alongside the agencies and academic institutions involved by exploring stakeholder-friendly approaches to bass conservation that will garner greater support for this study as well as future research initiatives.

While the MNRF in eastern Ontario is partnering with researchers to improve the understanding of bass nesting and recruitment, despite being native to other areas in the province, bass are not being adequately protected. In Lake Nipissing and regulations being proposed on the French River in FMZ 10, winter and regular seasons that overlap sensitive periods (i.e., overwintering, spawning, nesting) have the potential to threaten bass populations. Although peripheral to this proposal, we would like the MNRF to reconsider these approaches and collaborate with academia to learn more about these fisheries.

We look forward to the results of this research and ongoing consultation and engagement with the FMZ 18 Advisory Council.

Yours in Conservation,



Adam Weir
Fisheries Biologist

AW/jb

cc: Dr. Steven Cooke, Carleton University Professor
OFAH Board of Directors
OFAH Fisheries Advisory Committee
Angelo Lombardo, OFAH Executive Director
Matt DeMille, OFAH Director, Policy & Programs
Mark Ryckman, OFAH Manager, Policy
Chris Robinson, OFAH Manager, Programs
OFAH Policy & Programs Staff

References

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