

The Spirit of the Annual Smelt Run

Aired 4/29/08 and 5/1/08

Run Time: 4:38

Intro: This is Superior Science News. Today's program explores the decline of the smelt run in Lake Superior.

Smelt have been around for so long that some may not realize they are an invasive species. Smelt were first stocked into the St. Marys River in 1909 to ensure the success of salmon in the Great Lakes. Don Schreiner, Lake Superior Area Fisheries Supervisor for the Minnesota DNR, says smelt weren't found in Lake Superior until almost thirty years later.

"They actually were first found in Lake Superior in the mid-1940s. I think they became abundant in the Minnesota, Wisconsin areas here in about the 1950s. They seemed to have peaked in the early 1970s when people caught large quantities of smelt."

Jeff Gunderson, Minnesota Sea Grant Fisheries Specialist, says 'large quantities of smelt' might be an understatement.

"You talk about literally walking across the stream on smelt. A lot of these streams were like that. They could take away a pickup load of smelt by just dipping."

Schreiner and Gunderson say a strong Northland tradition evolved around the smelt run during its heyday.

"The run mostly occurs at night, so people would kind of sit around and wait and have a very festive atmosphere and wait for the smelt to come and they normally came and people netted them and had a great time. It was kind of carnival-like atmosphere."

"Anybody that was involved in or was around during the heyday of the smelt realized it was quite a festive experience back in April/May when the smelt were running. There were huge parties. People came from all over to harvest smelt. They'd take them back to their church feeds and for storing in their freezers for probably a lot longer than they wanted. But, it was a great time."

Smelt populations today are in stark contrast to numbers seen more than 30 years ago. Their numbers dropped significantly in the late 1970s. Schreiner says the most likely reason for the smelt's decline is the rehabilitation of lake trout populations after sea lamprey controls were put in place.

"Lake trout abundance had increased pretty substantially. So probably the major reason was that we had a large increase in predators that we did not have when smelt came into the lake. The second issue that occurs is, whenever you have an invading species, they tend to come in and escalate to high numbers very quickly and then tend to fall off and seek some equilibrium and smelt probably did that at about the same time the predator base was building up."

Sivertson Fisheries President Dick Martin of Superior has been smelt fishing for over 40 years. He says it was common to work 18-hour days in the warehouse when there numbers were in the hundreds of thousands. Things are quieter these days, but they're still busy during the smelt run.

"We leave the dock around 6 a.m. and depending on how much fish we get, we could be in at 10 o'clock. If there's a lot of fish, we might have to bring some back, get more empties and go back out. We can go into the evenings -- 9, 10 o'clock at night sometimes."

Martin says his phone's already been ringing off the hook with many people wondering, "Are the smelt running yet?"

"You know, when people call, it's a shame you don't know what to tell them. Years ago, you knew you were going to get them. Now you don't know if you're going to get enough to take care of all the people, so you might have to bring some in from elsewhere. But, we like to use our own. (laughs)"

Martin says they see quite a bit of fish during the run for about four or five days. Gunderson says that's shorter than the nearly two weeks of rivers, lakes, and streams teeming with smelt during runs 40 years ago.

"The smelt are still there. I don't think they'll ever disappear completely, but they'll not likely achieve the abundance in population size that they had back in the 60s and 70s."

Schreiner says people need a license now to fish for smelt and any caught have to be killed right away to avoid the transfer of fish diseases to inland lakes. But, he says, in spite of the many changes, the spirit of the smelt run lives on.

"The runs have become very short and much more limited than in the past. So you kind of have to be there, sometimes even the right night. Hopefully people will catch a few and enjoy themselves."

For Superior Science News, I'm Marie Zhuikov.

Outcue: This has been a production of Minnesota Sea Grant and KUWS radio.