



# Beyond WETTING A LINE

*By Greg Power*

Fishing isn't the same as catching. And, at times, catching isn't the same as harvesting. However, if you're an experienced North Dakota angler, you likely have caught and kept your fair share of fish in the past five or so years, and would perhaps agree that fishing in the state has never been better.

Depending on where you live, there are numerous fishing opportunities at more than a hundred lakes that didn't support a fishery a decade ago. Many of those waters now offer a variety of fish species.

Considering that fishing license sales and angler numbers have hit all-time highs in North Dakota in recent years, the question arises concerning the level of public involvement in various fishing issues.

It's fair to say the Game and Fish Department does hear, directly or indirectly, its share of general questions and comments: "We need a slot limit now ... Why isn't there a boat ramp on my lake? ... Shouldn't the Department be stocking more fish?"

These are fair questions that are followed with reasonable explanations from Game and Fish staff. In reality, however, these types of inquiries are generated by the same few dozen individuals. More power to them for making their opinions heard, but how about the other 200,000 active anglers?

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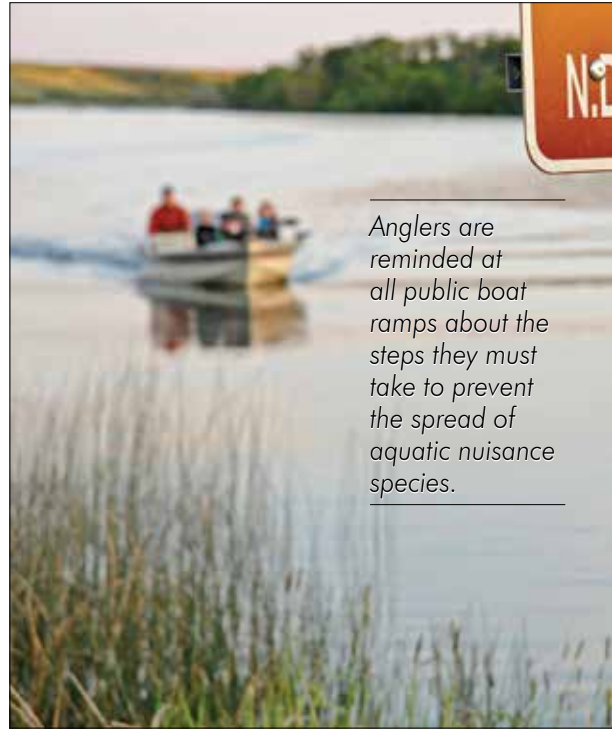
*While the walleye is the most revered fish species in the state, North Dakota offers many fishing opportunities for a variety of other species as well.*

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CRAIG BIRBLE

Mike Johnson, Department fisheries biologist in Jamestown, releases a walleye into Horseshoe Lake in Richland County.



Anglers are reminded at all public boat ramps about the steps they must take to prevent the spread of aquatic nuisance species.

The Department relies on public input and involvement for a variety of reasons. For instance:

- Strong working relationships with many local entities across the state, especially in terms of developing boat ramps, is vital.
- Landowners are often critical partners in providing fishing opportunities by providing public access easements.
- Fishing clubs serve as important conduits between Game and Fish and local anglers for information exchange.
- Groups such as the North Dakota Sport-fishing Congress play an important role in protecting, promoting and improving quality recreational fishing in North Dakota.
- Simple one-on-one correspondence with anglers provides the Department with local insight into various matters.

Unfortunately, public input and involvement has been waning for years. Reasons for this sparse civic participation are likely varied, but in the big picture it mirrors national trends where citizens are less and less involved in community matters (not to be confused with volunteerism). This can be seen upfront and personal with service clubs/organizations throughout the country that are aging rapidly,

with little recruitment of younger generations.

Closer to home, despite record numbers of North Dakota anglers, fishing clubs today number around 20, compared to 30 or more 15 years ago. The average age of club members is well into the 50s and, more importantly, club leaders are in their 60s and 70s.

Although every fishing club is welcoming and even actively recruiting younger members, successes have been extremely limited. As baby boomers continue to cross the threshold of 65, this trend will likely become even more apparent.

I read recently that an estimated 10,000 young people turn 21 every day in the United States. Wouldn't it be wonderful to recruit some of these young adults to take a more active role in stewardship of our natural resources?

Easier said than done, certainly, as challenges abound as how to tap into the youthful energy of these newer generations. Compared to their parents, they bring a different value set, which focuses on connectivity to the electronic world and less face-to-face communication.

It's long been understood the primary reasons people fish are to relax and spend time with family and friends. With these motivating factors in mind,





CRAIG BIRHLE



SANDRA JOHNSON

Fishing license sales and angler numbers in North Dakota have hit all-time highs in recent years.

it's easy to understand why individuals don't engage themselves in outdoor issues. Fishing for some, or most, is nothing more than a recreational activity.

Conversely, we also know that for select others, fishing is much more than a leisure activity. It's a passion. In 2015, about 5 percent of all North Dakota open water anglers fished 30 or more days. That's at least a month of fishing for the seven or so open water fishing months that North Dakota offers. In fact, 1 percent fished 60 or more days. This high overall fishing effort and participation, certainly, translates into a lot of money spent to fish. According to a 2011 North Dakota State University angler expenditure study, anglers fishing in North Dakota spend \$425 million, not including indirect expenses.

Extrapolating from that 1 percent of anglers who fished 60 or more days results in nearly 1,600 avid resident anglers. To put that in comparative perspective, the Game and Fish Department conducts 16 advisory board meetings across the state every year. The total attendance for the past 50 or so meetings may total 1,600, but that includes many of the same faces year after year. (And the dominant discussion at any one of these advisory board meetings seldom involves fishing).

The point is, despite North Dakota having a strong

fishing populace and an avid group of active anglers, few even attend one meeting a year.

Looking into a crystal ball, North Dakota's fishing resources face a lot of different challenges in years to come, including aquatic nuisance species and illegal bait transfer issues; erosion of a federal commitment to the two national fish hatcheries in the state; lack of meaningful fisheries input into water management; and inclusion of federal agricultural programs that reduce runoff and help improve water quality.

Without engagement from North Dakota's fishing public, tackling these and other challenges will be difficult. What is needed is the development of a broader base of anglers to become more involved in all things fishing, including attendance at Department-sponsored meetings held periodically across the state; involvement in local fishing clubs; and a show of support for the North Dakota Sportfishing Congress.

Any and all participation is welcomed.

The future doesn't rest solely with the Department and its biological staff, but with the willingness of anglers to become more engaged in their outdoor passion, beyond simply wetting a line.

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