

Summary of Research



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

Selected Highlights: 2004 Survey of Resident Anglers Concerning the Management of Warm Water Fish in Northwest Montana

RMU Research Summary No. 16

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Angling for warm water fish such as largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, yellow perch, and northern pike is a popular recreational activity in Montana. Northwest Montana is no exception to this rule, despite the fact that warm water fish tend to be slow growing in this part of the state (for example, a 3-pound bass or 10-inch perch may be eight years old). Numerous lakes, reservoirs, rivers, and streams in northwest Montana offer angling enthusiasts ample opportunity to pursue their favorite fish (a variety of both warm water fish and cold water fish such as trout).

Recently, some anglers have requested fish stocking to increase warm water fish numbers in some northwest Montana waters. Fish stocking may or may not be successful due to a number of reasons. And, if warm water fish such as bass are stocked, a \$5.00 Warm Water Game Fish stamp will be required for anglers to possess any warm water fish (including perch) caught in those northwest Montana waters that are stocked. Currently, all warm water fish in northwest Montana are managed as wild, self-sustaining fisheries through regulations and habitat enhancement. As such, the Warm Water Game Fish Stamp is NOT required at this time to harvest warm water fish in any waters located in this part of the state.

In an effort to better understand this issue from the perspective of warm water anglers, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) recently conducted a *2004 Survey of Resident Anglers Concerning the Management of Warm Water Fish in Northwest Montana*. This research summary highlights selected results from this important survey effort.

FIRST, SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A randomly selected sample of 1,500 licensed anglers who live in northwest Montana were mailed a survey questionnaire, and a 36 percent response rate to the survey was achieved.

Ninety-four percent of the survey respondents reported they fish in northwest Montana. And, 72 percent of those respondents reported they fish for warm water fish species in northwest Montana. The remaining information in this research summary focuses on results obtained from these warm water anglers.

DO RESIDENT WARM WATER ANGLERS SUPPORT WARM WATER FISH STOCKING IN NORTHWEST MONTANA?...THE ANSWER IS BOTH YES & NO

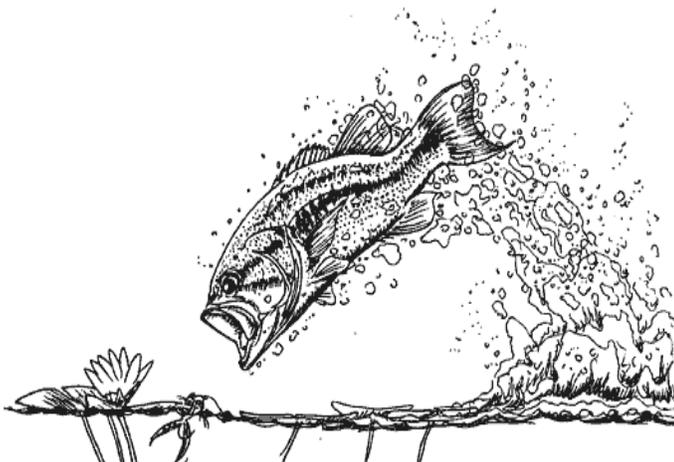
Warm water anglers were asked, "To what extent do you support or oppose warm water fish stocking in northwest Montana?" The overall response to this question was as follows:

27% Strongly oppose stocking
14% Oppose
21% Neutral
16% Support
22% Strongly support

These results suggest a "divided camp" among warm water anglers in northwest Montana. Simply put, there are many warm water anglers in northwest Montana who oppose stocking and there is nearly an equal number of anglers who support stocking. In an effort to better understand this, comparisons were made between both groups.

Those who support stocking spend more time fishing for warm water fish in northwest Montana. Survey respondents who support stocking reported spending an average of 30 days per year fishing for warm water fish in northwest Montana. This compares to 22 days per year for the respondents who oppose stocking

Those who support stocking spend more time fishing for warm water fish in Montana waters other than those located in northwest Montana. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents who support stocking reported they fish for warm water fish in Montana waters other than those located in northwest Montana. This compares to 16 percent of the respondents who oppose stocking.



Those who support stocking have more experience purchasing Montana's Warm Water Game Fish Stamp.

Thirty percent of the respondents who support stocking reported they have purchased the Warm Water Game Fish Stamp in Montana. This compares to nine percent of the respondents who oppose stocking. These results are not surprising considering the fact that supporters more frequently reported spending time fishing for warm water fish in Montana waters other than those located in northwest Montana. In 1999, the Montana Legislature created the \$5.00 Warm Water Game Fish Stamp to help raise warm water fish for stocking in designated Montana waters. Currently, there are about 60 designated waters in the Central and Eastern Fishing Districts only where warm water fish are stocked. The stamp is required for anglers to possess any warm water fish caught in these designated waters. The stamp is NOT required at this time to harvest warm water fish in any waters located in northwest Montana.

Fishing for yellow perch is an important focus for both groups; however, a little more so for those who oppose stocking. Forty-seven percent of the respondents who support stocking reported yellow perch as being one of the two warm water fish species they fish for most often in northwest Montana. This compares to 57 percent of the respondents who oppose stocking.

Fishing for largemouth bass is an important focus for both groups; however, a little more so for those who support stocking. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents who support stocking reported largemouth bass as being one of the two warm water fish species they fish for most often in northwest Montana. This compares to 28 percent of the respondents who oppose stocking.

HOW SHOULD WARM WATER FISH BE MANAGED IN NORTHWEST MONTANA?

After being told that warm water fish tend to be slow growing in northwest Montana, warm water anglers were asked, "As a general management philosophy, would you prefer more liberal limits with generally smaller fish, or more conservative limits to try and produce or maintain larger fish?" The overall response to this question was as follows:

41% Prefer Liberal Limits

59% Prefer Conservative Limits

Those who support stocking in northwest Montana are more supportive of conservative limits in an effort to produce/maintain larger fish in this part of the state. Seventy-six percent of the respondents who support stocking prefer conservative limits as a general management philosophy. This compares to 44 percent of the respondents who oppose stocking.

DISCUSSION

This survey focused on identifying the opinions and preferences of resident warm water anglers concerning the management of warm water fish in northwest Montana. Information obtained from this survey will be used by fishery managers to help guide future management of warm water fish in this part of the state.

Survey findings reinforce the notion that the issue of stocking warm water fish in northwest Montana is a complicated one. While many resident warm water anglers oppose stocking, there is a nearly equal number of anglers who support stocking. The survey findings presented herein, in combination with additional input offered by the public at FWP Commission meetings, will be considered by the Commission as part of the decision making process about whether or not to stock warm water fish in some northwest Montana waters.

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