



Warmwater anglers have high hopes for the state's walleye fishing. Too high?

Great Expectations

BY TOM DICKSON

CHUCK LAWSON OF GLASGOW DREAMS of the day when Fort Peck Reservoir, the sprawling Missouri River impoundment in northeastern Montana, produces world-class walleye fishing. The energetic tournament angler envisions Glasgow as a walleye fishing mecca, where local boat dealerships throng with customers, tournament anglers fill local restaurants, and families from across the United States arrive daily for their walleye fishing vacation.

"This lake could produce excellent fishing like they've got in Lake Erie, [North Dakota's Lake] Sakakawea, and other great walleye lakes around the country," says Lawson. "But the past couple of years, the fishing has been crummy."

He's not the only one hoping for better walleye fishing. Across the state, warmwater anglers continue to press Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to find new ways to produce more of their favorite fish, an equally tasty but much larger cousin to the perch and sauger. Fueling their hopes are national fishing magazines, TV shows, and Internet sites,

which report on the nation's best walleye fishing and create what biologists and others say may be unrealistically high expectations among local anglers.

Steve Quinn, editor of *In-Fisherman* magazine (considered the bimonthly bible among walleye anglers nationwide), concedes that the spread of information by his

publication and other media not only raises interest in walleyes but also expectations by walleye anglers for what their local waters should produce.

"I can see how it puts pressure on the states to upgrade their programs with stocking or regulations," says Quinn, who previously worked as a biologist for a state conservation agency. "As an angler, I know what it's like to want better walleye fishing, but as a biologist, I know that it's really hard if not impossible to force a lake to produce more or bigger fish than it can."

WHY SO PRIZED

Unlike many game fish, which put up a scrappy fight once hooked, the main attraction of walleyes are their sweet, bone-free fillets.

"I grew up fishing trout," says Jan Carter, a taxidermist in Helena. "But the first time I tasted walleye, I said, 'This is it.'"

Walleyes also grow big. The state record is 16.63 pounds, and an average catch is roughly 1 to 2 pounds, about twice the size of the average stream trout brought to net.



ERIC ENGBRETSON

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES: Anglers want to catch more and bigger fish at walleye reservoirs such as Holter (left). Biologists say they want to improve fishing but caution that the lack of good habitat may limit walleye population growth and catch rates in many Montana waters.

Adding to the growing appeal of walleye fishing is that it often requires lots of mechanical gadgets and gear. Big motors, tri-hulled boats, depth-finders, GPS units, crankbaits, and other rugged-sounding equipment attract many anglers less enthralled by the frilly accoutrements of trout fly fishing, with its zingers, nippers, and tiny sewing utensils.

Walleye fishing may be growing in popularity, but trout still dominate the state's fisheries management landscape. A 2001 Montana FWP study found that 88 percent of the 2.7 million angler days in the state were spent fishing for coldwater species. Nevertheless, FWP officials say they pay close attention to warmwater species, especially walleyes. Better walleye fishing, they note, is a top goal of the agency's statewide ten-year warmwater management plan.

Central to that plan is boosting the number of walleyes caught at Fort Peck Reservoir. At 240,000 acres, the lake is by far the state's biggest, nearly three times the size of Flathead Lake. It also produces the most walleyes and attracts the most walleye fishing pressure, roughly 100,000 angler days per year.

However, in recent years walleye fishing there has been slow. Mike Ruggles, fisheries biologist for the reservoir, explains that the poor fishing is largely due to the reservoir's low water, which has reduced perch spawning habitat. Perch numbers rise when lake levels are high and flood shoreline shallows where the fish spawn. With fewer perch to eat, walleyes have been pursuing ciscoes, which live in deep water where it's difficult for anglers to fish. Anglers and biologists say that higher water levels could produce better walleye fishing.

There's less agreement, however, on how much walleye stocking the agency can and should do at Fort Peck. Because the reservoir has little natural walleye spawning habitat, FWP must stock it to maintain a decent walleye fishery. Currently, the agency stocks the most walleyes it can produce in its hatchery system and also allocate to Fort

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

DEEP TROLLING FOR

Monster Walleye

The downrigger-crankbait combo is your ticket to the region's biggest marble-eyes



THE BIGGEST AND BEST: Fishing articles and TV shows highlight North America's best walleye fishing, raising expecta-

tions that such exceptional angling could be commonplace in Montana waters.

Peck Reservoir (other reservoirs across the state also require hatchery walleyes). Stocking will increase when a new Fort Peck multi-species hatchery is built. The \$20 million facility, scheduled for completion in 2005, will more than double the number of walleye fingerlings the state can rear.

Will the new hatchery make Fort Peck

one of the nation's premier walleye waters? Local supporters are crossing their fingers, but FWP officials caution anglers to not get their hopes too high.

"The critical factor that will make or break the Fort Peck walleye fishery is water levels," says Bill Wiedenheft, FWP northeast region fisheries manager. "Continued low water will make it tough for us to collect enough eggs from wild walleyes in Fort Peck for rearing in the hatchery and then stocking."

If water levels increase, however, FWP could collect more eggs to rear for stocking. Catch rates could rise, too. The ten-year Fort Peck Fisheries Management Plan, adopted last year, sets an ambitious catch-rate goal of 0.5 walleyes per hour, or one fish caught every two hours. Not only could high water boost walleye hatchery production, but by flooding shorelines it would provide more perch and shiner habitat, thus attracting walleyes to shallower water where they could be easier to find and catch.

FWP biologists say they will try to achieve their high catch-rate goal, but it won't be easy—even if the lake's water levels rise.



MONTANA OUTDOORS / MAGAZINE PHOTO BY DUSANSMETANA.COM

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Despite rumors to the contrary, no walleye lake in any state consistently produces catch rates as high as 0.5 fish per hour. Jeff Tyson, a biologist with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, says recreational catch rates on Lake Erie—considered the nation's premier walleye water—generally run between 0.3 and 0.4 fish per hour. Greg Power, an official with the North Dakota Department of Game and Fish, says Lake Sakakawea has averaged catch rates similar to Lake Erie's over the past 10 to 15 years.

"Statewide, our objective for walleye lakes is about 0.2 fish per hour, or one fish per five hours of fishing," he says, adding that a catch rate of 0.5 fish per hour is probably not sustainable. "A lake just can't produce anything near that year after year."

TOO MANY WALLEYES?

For a lake to produce such a high catch rate, say biologists, it would likely have become a "predator pit," a term for when too many predators overwhelm a lake's ability to provide food. That's the concern at Canyon Ferry Reservoir, near Helena,

where a growing walleye population could be on the verge of exploding and thus outstripping available food. The result, say FWP officials, could be stunted walleyes and a decline in other popular game fish.

"Our concern," says Ron Spoon, FWP area fisheries manager at Helena, "is that we will end up with fewer trout, fewer perch, and a bunch of little walleye snakes."

Impounded in 1954, Canyon Ferry Reservoir has for decades been one of the state's most popular fishing lakes. FWP stocks it with rainbow trout, which thrive in the cold, deep waters. A healthy, naturally reproducing perch population provides exceptional ice fishing most winters.

In the early 1990s, some local anglers began asking FWP to stock walleyes at Canyon Ferry. The agency resisted, citing a Montana State University study that said a new walleye population would quickly outgrow the available prey (perch) population and begin eating newly stocked trout. Eventually, the study concluded, Canyon Ferry would be filled with lots of walleyes, but they'd be small, and the trout and

perch fishing would suffer.

The stocking debate proved moot, however, when walleyes began turning up in FWP survey nets. (Debate continues as to how the fish got into Canyon Ferry.) Regardless of their origin, however, the walleyes quickly prospered. By the late 1990s, anglers were regularly catching the glassy-eyed fish at a reservoir once renowned solely for its trout and perch fishing.

FWP survey nets now show the walleye population at high levels, with many fish approaching spawning age (five years old). That could produce a massive year class this spring or in 2004 and lead to an overabundance of predators. In response, the agency has instituted a 20-fish limit to knock down walleye numbers. Spoon says the agency has a responsibility to protect the fish species sought by Canyon Ferry's many trout and perch anglers. The new walleye limit, he adds, should also help decrease both the peaks and the inevitable crashes of the perch and walleye populations.

Still, the high limit has angered some local walleye anglers. Mike Sedlock of



THE WALLEYES HAVE IT: Named for its large, glassy pupils, which allow the fish to see in dark or muddy water, the walleye is prized as a food fish. Though trout are still the most popular species, walleyes are becoming increasingly sought after in Montana and other western states.

Montana's top walleye waters

Walleyes exist in lakes and warmwater rivers throughout the state's eastern two-thirds. Listed here are the largest and most popular (and the nearest large town).

- Fresno Reservoir (Havre)
- Tiber Reservoir and the Marias River below Tiber Dam (Shelby)
- Hauser Reservoir (Helena)
- Holter Reservoir (Helena)
- Canyon Ferry Reservoir (Helena)
- Missouri River (Great Falls to the North Dakota border)
- Fort Peck Reservoir (Glasgow)
- Nelson Reservoir (Malta)
- Poplar River (Scobey)
- Milk River (from Fresno Dam to the confluence with the Missouri near Fort Peck)
- Bighorn River (from Yellowtail Dam to the confluence with the Yellowstone at Bighorn)
- Tongue River (from the Tongue River Dam to the confluence with the Yellowstone at Miles City)
- Bighorn Lake and afterbay (southeast of Billings)
- Cooney Reservoir (southwest of Billings)
- Yellowstone River (between Billings and the North Dakota border)



JEFF HENRY/ROCHEJAUNE PICTURES

LOW WATER, LOW CATCH RATES: Due to prolonged drought and continual releases by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the water level at Fort Peck has dropped severely in recent years. Biologists say the low water makes it difficult to capture walleyes to take eggs for rearing and stocking. Low water also reduces the spawning habitat of perch, a walleye food favorite. Low perch numbers send walleyes after ciscoes, into deeper waters where it's harder for anglers to find and catch fish.

Helena says he doesn't trust the FWP's netting results. He believes the population is declining, not increasing, and that the 20-fish limit could harm the walleye population.

"People aren't catching walleyes here like they were a few years ago," says Sedlock, a Walleyes Unlimited of Montana regional director. "I know what FWP is saying about their surveys, but something doesn't jibe."

Spoon explains the walleyes have temporarily stopped biting due to a massive year class of perch, which walleyes prefer to anglers' offerings.

"I know it's hard to believe when you fish all day and don't catch a single walleye," he

says. "But our nets confirm the fish are there and their stomachs are full of perch."

COULD IT GET WORSE?

When FWP says it doesn't want too many walleyes in a reservoir, the most obvious question by anglers is, "What could it hurt?"

The answer, according to biologists nationwide, is that an overpopulation of walleyes or any predator fish can actually worsen the fishing.

"You guys up there don't know what you're asking for," says Wayne Nelson-Stastny, a South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks fisheries biologist at Lake Oahe. "You

don't want the fishery we had in the late-'90s."

The problem, says Nelson-Stastny, was a predator boom. Oahe's walleye population had increased during the mid-1990s as the predators fed on abundant rainbow smelt, the reservoir's primary prey fish. Walleye fishing those years was excellent, with catch rates averaging 0.34 fish per hour and size averaging 18.5 inches.

Then the fishery tanked. First, the smelt population crashed, in part because it grew so big the fish began cannibalizing each other. Then, in 1997, exceptionally high water forced the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to release massive amounts of water from the reservoir, flushing millions of smelt downstream.

"All of a sudden we had all these walleyes with nothing to eat," says Nelson-Stastny. "They started to starve."

At first, catch rates rocketed, nearly tripling to 1.1 fish per hour as the walleyes hungrily attacked lures and baits. But soon the malnourished fish stopped growing; average size dropped to 14.7 inches.

"They were emaciated," says Nelson-Stastny, "with thin, rubbery fillets you couldn't even eat."

Despite the high catch rates, anglers weren't interested in fishing for eel-shaped walleyes and went elsewhere. Fishing pressure at Oahe dropped by nearly 75 percent, from nearly 2 million fishing hours in 1996 to just 540,000 fishing hours in 2000.

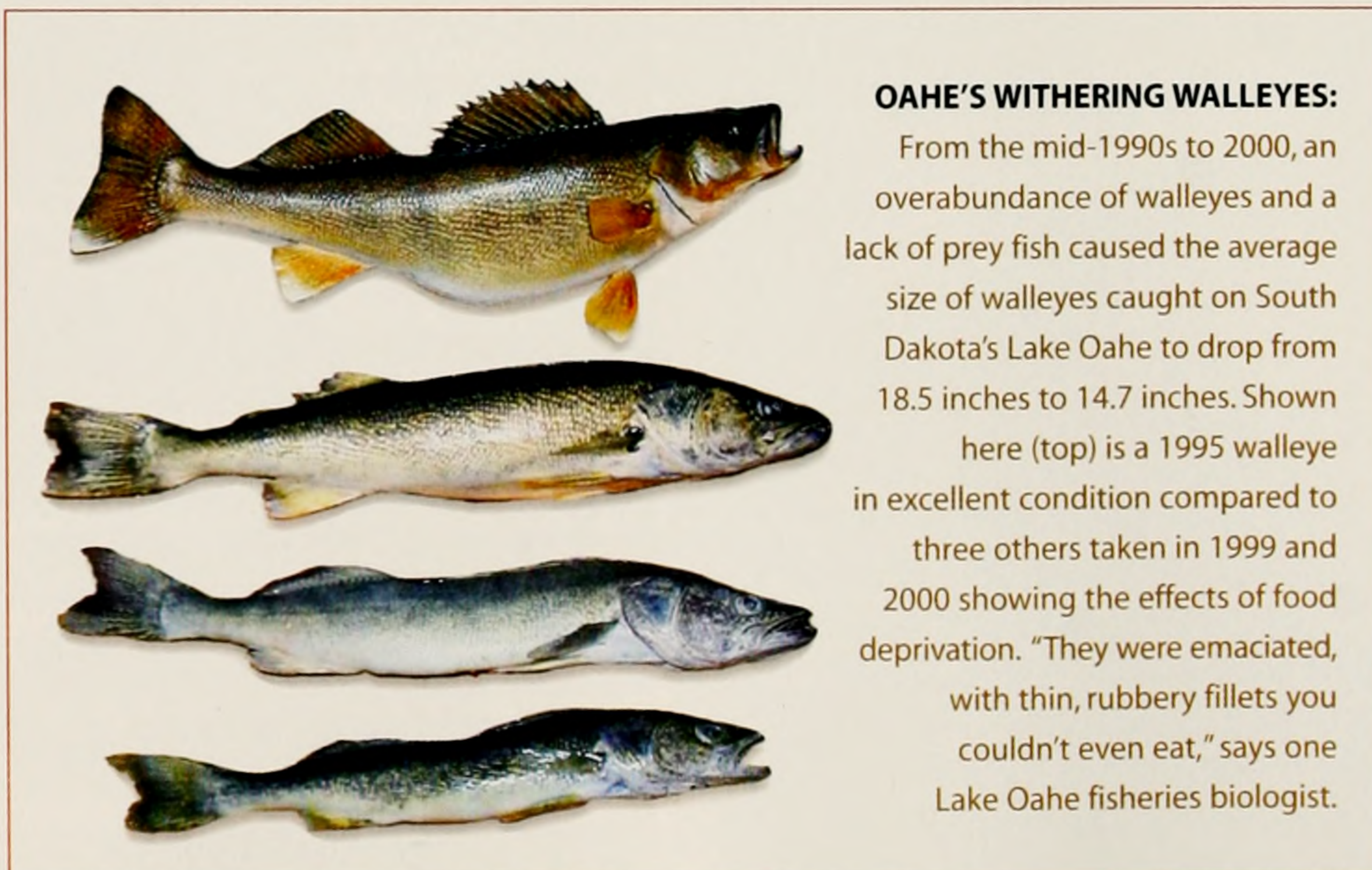
"Actually, a lot of guys around here headed up to Fort Peck, where they could catch some decent-sized fish," Nelson-Stastny says.

Montana fisheries managers aren't the only ones keeping a close eye on the Oahe fiasco. Power says North Dakota doesn't stock Sakakawea in years when natural reproduction appears strong, to avoid producing too many predators.

"Every year we carefully watch our stocking rates," he says. "It's a real balancing act. We know what happened on Oahe, and that really scares us."

MORE RESPECT

No angler wants to see Montana lakes filled with scrawny walleyes. And, despite some disagreement with how FWP manages walleye waters, most anglers understand the agency has little control over weather and water levels. They also know fishing can't be



OAHE'S WITHERING WALLEYES:

From the mid-1990s to 2000, an overabundance of walleyes and a lack of prey fish caused the average size of walleyes caught on South Dakota's Lake Oahe to drop from 18.5 inches to 14.7 inches. Shown here (top) is a 1995 walleye in excellent condition compared to three others taken in 1999 and 2000 showing the effects of food deprivation. "They were emaciated, with thin, rubbery fillets you couldn't even eat," says one Lake Oahe fisheries biologist.

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF GAME, FISH AND PARKS

Managing the marble-eye

Montana FWP manages walleyes primarily by improving walleye and forage fish spawning habitat, monitoring populations, and stocking walleyes. The toughest of the three to control, says Kent Gilge, FWP fisheries biologist at Havre, is habitat.

"Every walleye lake in Montana is actually a reservoir," he says. "What mainly affects reservoir fish habitat are water levels. And frankly, we don't have much say over that."

Gilge says fisheries managers ask the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which control water levels on most walleye reservoirs, to keep water levels high in spring to flood shorelines and provide rearing habitat for young walleyes and forage species. "Unfortunately," he adds, "they don't take fish very highly into consideration."

Especially in drought years, the Corps releases water from Fort Peck and other reservoirs to raise downstream river flows so barges can travel along the Mississippi River. And farmers use reservoir water to irri-

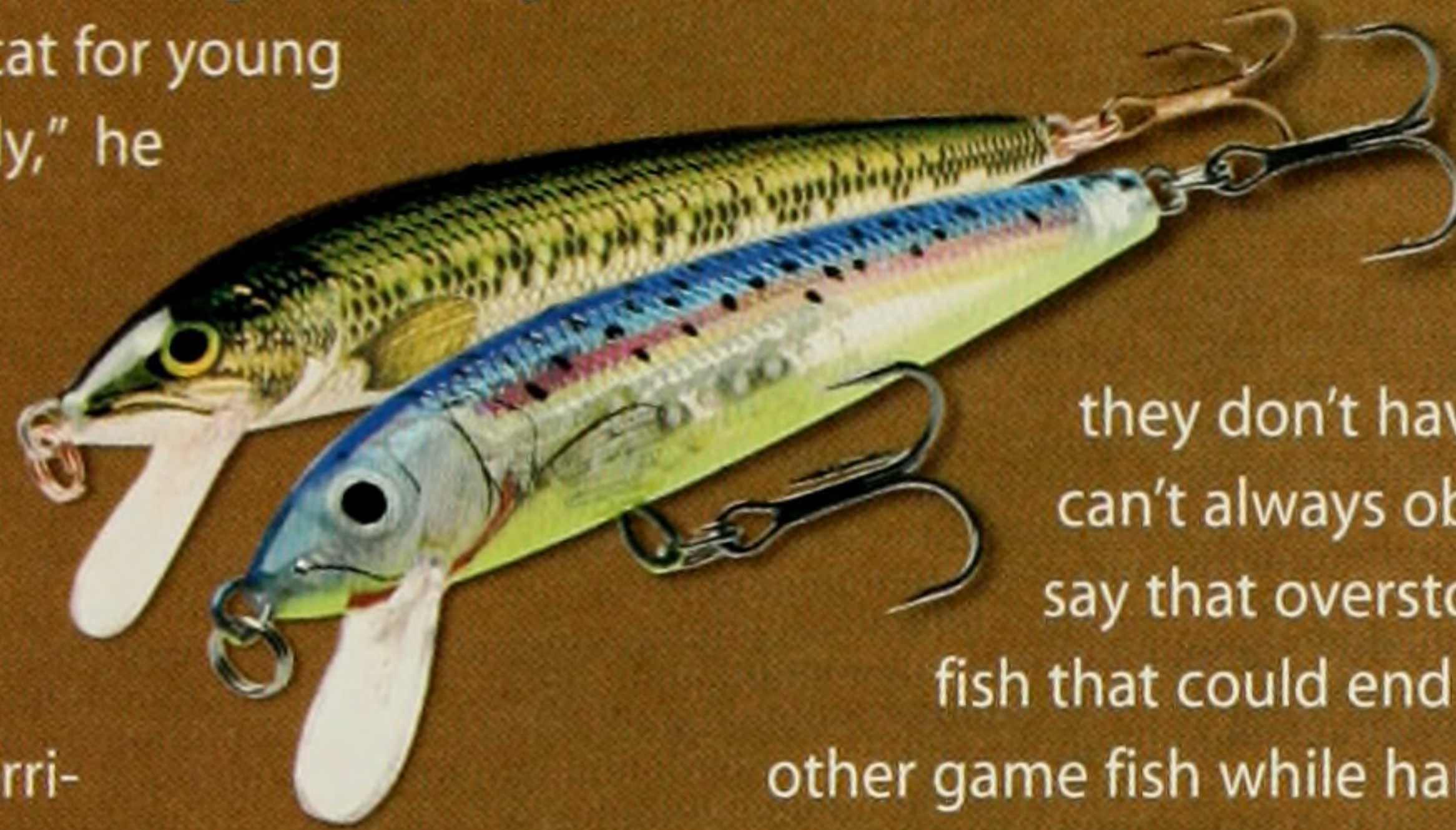
gate crops, which sometimes deprives fish of water.

"Fresno Reservoir gets severely drained on average about once every four years," Gilge adds. "That makes it pretty tough on the walleyes and forage fish."

Another way biologists manage walleyes is by keeping track of populations. They lower gill nets in late summer and then weigh, age, and inspect the captured fish. Biologists also seine shoreline areas in late summer to see how the previous spring's year class, or generation of fish, is faring. Another way they learn about walleye populations is by conducting creel surveys, in which they ask anglers about the size and number of walleyes caught.

Stocking proves to be the most controversial aspect of the agency's walleye management work. Anglers want FWP to stock more, and the agency often resists. FWP biologists maintain

they don't have enough hatchery fish to stock and can't always obtain more from other states. They also say that overstocking could lead to a glut of predator fish that could end up stunting the growth of walleyes and other game fish while harming prey fish populations.



great, or even good, every day. What may matter more to walleye anglers than catch rates and stocking levels could simply be getting more respect from state fisheries officials.

"I think in the eyes of many department biologists," says Sedlock, "a walleye fisherman is a second-class citizen. I think there's still this mentality that Montana is a trout state, end of story."

Adding to that perception is the belief that the FWP headquarters in Helena doesn't pay much attention to eastern Montanans' concerns. "One of my big questions," says Steve Harada, Walleyes Unlimited of Montana president, "is whether we are getting our fair share of FWP funding out here."

FWP officials say that, based on population and angling participation, both eastern Montana and walleye fisheries statewide receive an equitable proportion of agency funds.

"Warmwater anglers are definitely getting their fair share," says Chris Hunter, FWP fisheries chief.

But Hunter and other FWP officials note

that the agency could do more to improve relations between it and the walleye fraternity. The agency was sluggish in its support for the Fort Peck hatchery and for a new warmwater fishing stamp, both strongly favored by Walleyes Unlimited members.

"There were sound financial reasons for our withholding support for both," says FWP northeast region supervisor Jim Satterfield. "But the walleye folks were really impressive in how they made those things happen, and in hindsight I think we might have done more to help them out."

In recent years, the two sides have come much closer together. "We really do want the same thing anglers want, which is better fishing," notes Wiedenheft, the northeast region

fisheries manager. The agency has invited walleye anglers to help with survey nettings at Canyon Ferry and other reservoirs and with egg-taking operations at Fort Peck. Walleyes Unlimited has reciprocated by buying equipment for walleye management and installing perch habitat. The group's extensive website (walleyesunlimited.com) even features an "Ask the Biologist" section, where anglers can get answers from FWP staff to their fishing and management questions.

"Some of our guys don't get that FWP is really trying," says Mark Henckel, outdoors editor for the *Billings Gazette* and a long-time WU member. "But it only makes sense that biologists wouldn't want to produce a poor fishery." 🐟

HELPING HANDS: In recent years, FWP officials and Walleyes Unlimited members have worked more closely to find new ways to improve walleye numbers and angling success. Says one walleye angler, "It only makes sense that biologists wouldn't want to produce a poor fishery."

