New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Bureau of Fisheries

JUSTIFICATION BRIEF

Issue: Statewide Sunfish and Crappie Harvest Regulation Proposals

Proposed Management Change

1. Reduce the sunfish statewide daily limit from 50/day to 25/day.

2. Increase the crappie statewide minimum size limit from 9 inches to 10 inches.

Rationale

Sunfish and crappie are widespread and abundant throughout New York and are popular with anglers, collectively accounting for approximately 900,000 days fished in 2017 (Duda et al. 2019). These species generally provide harvest-based fisheries, and anglers can have significant impacts on population structure where bag limits are liberal and harvest is intense (Coble 1988, Olson and Cunningham 1989, Green and Brooking 1994, Parsons and Reed 1998, Beard and Kampa 1999).

The current statewide sunfish possession limit is 50 per day and has been in place since 1996. This limit was founded largely on the rationale that 50 fish per day should generally provide sustainable and equitable opportunities for harvest. The current statewide fishing regulations for crappie, implemented in 2000, include a possession limit of 25 per day and a minimum size limit of 9 inches. Prior to that time a minimum size limit of 6 inches was in effect. The rationale for the increase in the minimum size limit was to enhance or maintain populations of high size quality. There is, however, concern that these regulations may no longer be adequate to ensure sustainable quality fishing for these species, as new fishing technology and widespread use of social media have improved fishing efficiency and effectiveness.

An online survey of New York sunfish anglers was conducted in 2020 to gauge current views on sunfish daily limits to determine, in part, if there would be support for more conservative harvest regulations (Loukmas 2020a). Of the more than 1,400 respondents, 77% thought that an appropriate daily limit for sunfish should be 30 or less, and 57% favored 20 or less, an indication that a decrease in the statewide daily limit would generally be supported. New York crappie anglers were not queried, but the Bureau of Fisheries felt that as panfish anglers they too would also be supportive of more conservative fishing regulations if those regulations were likely to improve the size quality of fish.

The statewide proposals listed here were developed and released for public review as part of a Draft New York Sunfish and Crappie Management Plan (NYSDEC 2020a). Overall, the statewide proposals were viewed very favorably, which was another indication that anglers would be supportive of more conservative regulations (NYSDEC 2021a; Figure 1).

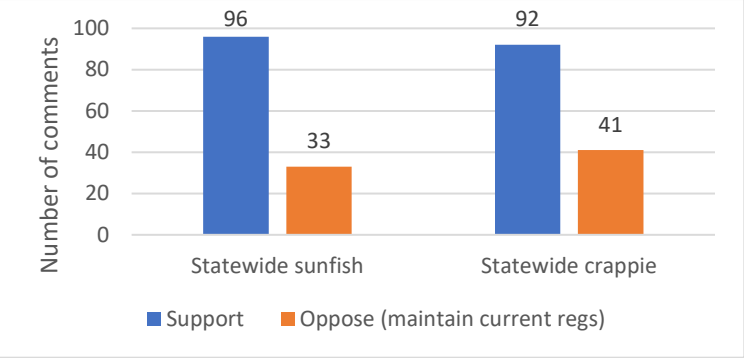

Figure 1. The number of comments in support or opposition for sunfish and crappie statewide regulation proposals.

The proposed statewide regulations are modest adjustments that reflect a recognition by anglers and the Bureau of Fisheries that more conservative harvest regulations should now broadly be considered as conservation safeguards for these resources. These proposed regulations are intended to ensure sustainable, quality sunfish and crappie fishing in the

waters capable of providing those types of fisheries throughout the state. If adopted, these regulations are planned to take effect in 2022.

Evaluation

A combination of angler surveys and fish population surveys will be employed to evaluate the potential impacts of the proposed regulations. Details for collecting data and performing the evaluation are as follows:

- **Sunfish Sampling:** Evaluation of statewide regulation changes on sunfish populations will occur opportunistically as part of management plans that will be developed for significant fisheries throughout the state (i.e., Destination or Regionally Significant Fisheries), where sunfish are considered an important component of the fishery. The Bureau of Fisheries Bass and Sunfish Electrofishing Protocol (Brooking et al. 2018) will be used to ensure sampling standardization.

- **Crappie Sampling:** Evaluation of statewide changes on crappie populations will be conducted on the following 10 waters:
    - Blydenburgh Lake (Region 1),
    - Muscoot Reservoir (Region 3),
    - Saratoga Lake (Region 5),
    - Delta Lake (Region 6),
    - Otisco Lake (Region 7),
    - Cazenovia Lake (Region 7),
    - Honeoye Lake, Waneta/Lamoka lakes (Region 8),
    - Bear Lake (Region 9).

  These waters will be monitored as part of the Big Panfish Initiative Study, with statewide regulation changes evaluated annually through at least 2023 (NYSDEC 2021b). Evaluation of the statewide regulation also will occur opportunistically as part of management plans that will be developed for significant fisheries throughout the state (i.e., Destination or Regionally Significant Fisheries), where crappie are considered an important component of the fishery. The Bureau of Fisheries Sunfish and Crappie Trap Netting Protocol (Loukmas 2020b) will be used to ensure sampling standardization.

- **Angler Feedback:** Angler surveys will be periodically conducted to obtain feedback and ascertain satisfaction regarding the new harvest limit for sunfish and size limit for crappie.

- **Reporting:** A final evaluation report will be completed by April 2026. If necessary, adjustments to the regulations will be made commensurate with the recommendations of the final evaluation report.

Literature Cited

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