

## Angler Opinion Survey on the Oneida Lake Walleye Daily Limit

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The Oneida Lake walleye fishery has been managed with a possession limit of 3/day since 2000 in response to a decline in the population from a high of over 1,000,000 adult fish in the mid-1980s to fewer than 300,000 in the late 1990s. For the last two decades the adult population has been relatively stable at a moderate level (300,000 – 500,000), but a 2019 mark-recapture population abundance assessment conducted by Cornell University documented a rebound in the adult walleye population to over 1,000,000 fish, the highest it's been since 1986 (Jackson et al. 2020). Large year classes in 2010, 2013, 2014 and 2015 contributed to the population increase. Indications are that there were additional strong year classes produced in 2016 and 2018, which should help maintain or even increase the abundance of the adult population as they enter the fishery at age-4 in 2020 and 2022. DEC and Cornell scientists are concerned that the abundant walleye population could have negative impacts on the forage fish populations in the lake, particularly yellow perch. Thus, a moderate decrease in the adult walleye population is desirable for sustaining the health of both the walleye and yellow perch fisheries. To achieve this, a return to the statewide walleye daily limit of 5 fish/day was under consideration to increase potential harvest. There was, however, a need to inform anglers of this management challenge and also better understand how they might view this approach.

To obtain angler opinions regarding the potential change in the walleye daily limit, a simple web-based survey was developed using SurveyGizmo® and delivered via a DEC Delivers Fishing and Boating newsletter email announcement to nearly 140,000 subscribers. The survey was also made available to Oneida Lake Association members via a link on their website. The survey was active from June 26 – July 8 and included a brief background statement on the Oneida Lake walleye abundance increase with a rationale for potentially increasing the daily limit to 5/day. The survey instrument included the following three questions:

1. How do you feel about increasing the daily limit of walleye from 3 fish per day to 5 fish per day in Oneida Lake?
  - Strongly support
  - Support
  - No opinion
  - Oppose
  - Strongly oppose

2. Have you fished Oneida Lake?
  - Yes
  - No

And, if yes:

3. How recently have you fished Oneida Lake?
  - Within the last year
  - Within 5 years
  - 5 years ago or more



A total of 2,256 surveys were completed. Most respondents (85%) had fished Oneida Lake, and a majority of them (80%) had fished it within the last year (Figure 1). Among all respondents, the majority (62.2%) either supported or strongly supported increasing the limit to 5/day, while 33.1% either opposed or strongly opposed the proposed change. All respondent groups, whether they fished the lake or not, generally supported the proposed change. Those who had fished the lake in the last year had the highest amount of opposition (41%) among all groups, but this group of anglers were generally in support (57.7%) of the proposed change. Those who had fished the lake more than a year ago were overwhelmingly in favor of the change (Figure 1).

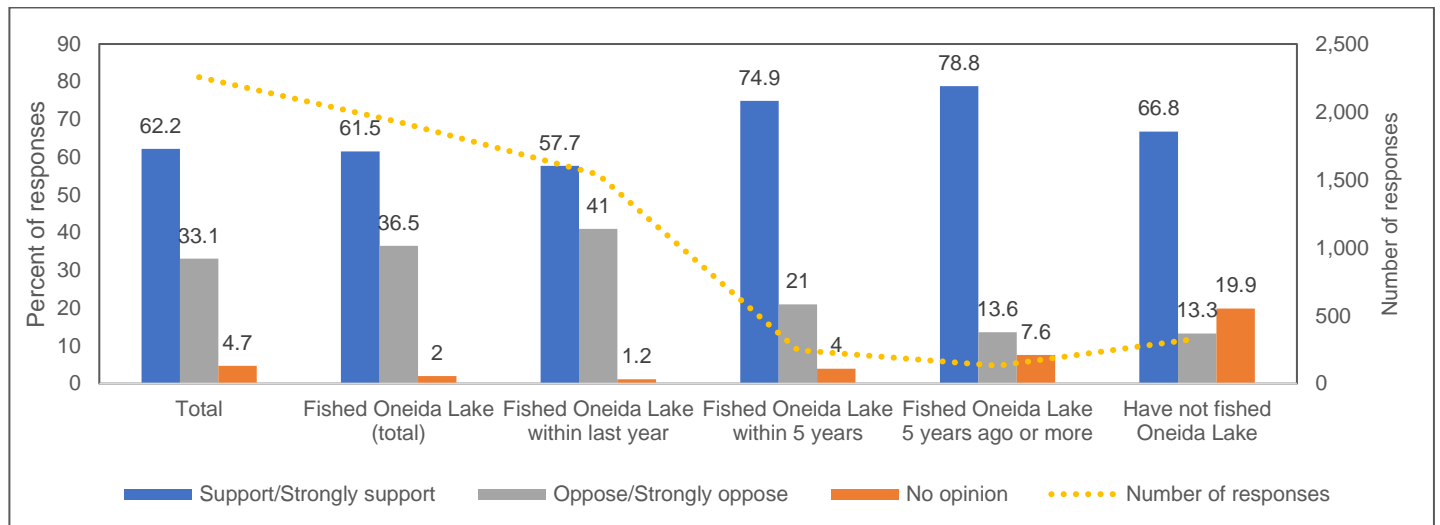


Figure 1. Angler opinions on increasing the possession limit for walleye in Oneida Lake from 3/day to 5/day.

The high number of responses to this survey indicates that the results are representative of anglers who have experience fishing Oneida Lake or those who may be interested in fishing the lake in the future. The consistent level of support among all groups for increasing the possession limit to 5/day suggests that, in general, anglers are interested in additional harvest opportunities and they recognize the biological justification for making this change. The relatively high response rate also suggests that simple surveys such as this delivered via a listserv are a cost effective tool to not only collect data on anglers attitudes and opinions on various management issues, but for also educating them on the current state of a fishery and options available to sustain or improve upon it.

Appropriate management of the Oneida Lake walleye fishery relies on biological information and knowledge of angler desires and opinions. The abundant walleye population, projections that it will be sustained for at the least the next several years, and potential risks to the forage base, including yellow perch, indicate that an increase in harvest is now warranted. Increasing the possession limit is the management option most likely to accomplish this, and survey respondents were generally supportive of this potential change. Therefore, an increase in the Oneida Lake walleye daily limit from 3/day to 5/day is recommended.

### Literature Cited

Jackson, J.R., A.J. VanDeValk, T.E. Brooking, K.T. Holeck, C. Hotaling, and L.G. Rudstam. 2020. The fisheries and limnology of Oneida Lake, 2019. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration, F63-R, Study 2, Bureau of Fisheries Report #cr1354, Albany, New York.