

OCCA assists SUNY-BFS with fish stocking plan

Photo caption: Martha Clarvoe, president of the Otsego County Conservation Association, and Dr. Willard Harman, director of the SUNY-Oneonta Biological Field Station, release walleye fingerlings into Otsego Lake in an effort to control the invasive alewife and improve the lake's ecological balance.

On July 6, approximately 10,000 walleye fingerlings were introduced into Otsego Lake at Three Mile Point. For 2009, the Otsego County Conservation Association dedicated \$6,000 in support of the SUNY-Oneonta Biological Field Station's six-year management plan for walleye stocking in Otsego Lake. This summer the BFS will release a total of 40,000 walleye fingerlings into the lake at several locations. According to BFS officials, the fingerlings are released in water about 15 feet deep over weed beds where they can hide to escape predators.

"Walleye stocking has proven to be an effective means of controlling the alewife, an invasive aquatic species which threatens the ecological balance of Otsego Lake," said OCCA executive director Erik Miller.

The walleye is a game fish historically popular in Otsego Lake. By the 1970s it had disappeared due to the accidental introduction of the cisco, a fish which preys heavily on walleye fry, in the 1950s. In the mid-1980s the alewife, a non-native forage fish, was illegally introduced to the lake.

"Since the alewife is highly effective at consuming the microscopic aquatic animals we call zooplankton, they decimated the larger plankton, which allowed algae to go unchecked. This situation led to reduced water clarity and, more significantly, lower oxygen levels in deeper waters," said BFS director Dr. Willard Harman.

The program to re-establish walleye in Otsego Lake got underway in 2000. Since that time, between 40,000 to 80,000 walleye have been stocked each year, including several thousand advanced fingerlings in the fall.

OCCA also contributed \$2,000 to the initial stocking effort. Apart from OCCA, funding has been provided by the Gronewaldt Foundation and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

Evidence suggestive of the success of the program was found when, in cooperation with the Biological Field Station, the DEC set out gill nets in the fall of 2002.

"We were astounded at the numbers and size of the walleye," said Matt Albright, assistant to the director of the Biological Field Station. According to Albright, not only were the walleye unexpectedly long (16 to 19 inches), they were also fat, and their bellies were full of alewife.

"The abundance of larger zooplankton has increased substantially, and their mean size is larger," Harman said, adding that "transparency and deep water oxygen declines are also somewhat improved after 15 years of gradual decline."

According to Miller, support of the walleye stocking program is consistent with goals defined in the Plan for the Management of the Otsego Lake Watershed, approved by the towns of Middlefield, Otsego, and Springfield, and the Village of Cooperstown in 1998.