



Regulatory Guidelines for Managing
the Channel Catfish Sport Fishery in
Ontario

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This report describes the regulatory options for the management of channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) fisheries in Ontario. The goal is to ensure that regulations can be rationalized to achieve resource sustainability while, at the same time, streamlining and simplifying Ontario's fishing regulations and providing additional angling opportunities.

Although channel catfish have traditionally not been over-exploited by sport fishing in Ontario, province-wide catch limits should be implemented to place a value on the resource and to prevent over-exploitation where necessary.

In order to provide consistency for the management of channel catfish in Ontario, the regulatory options contained herein are the recommended options to be used in the development of any new sport fish regulations for channel catfish.

Channel catfish are currently listed as a coarse species under the Ontario Fishing Regulations and as such are subject to non-angling regulations. It is recommended that channel catfish be removed as a species that is taken by non-angling methods.

Introduction

The range of channel catfish in Canada is limited to portions of Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. In Ontario the northern range of channel catfish is described by Scott and Crossman (1973), as being limited to south of a line extending from "the Ottawa River through Lake Nipissing and the French River to Lake Superior and in the Nelson River system to extreme western Ontario", this description is in agreement with the range map reported by Mandrak and Crossman (1992) (Figure 1). In Ontario channel catfish are only reported in a total of 122 waterbodies (Kerr, 2003).

While little information exists regarding the recreational harvest of channel catfish in Canada, they are considered an excellent food fish, a commercial fish of some importance in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, and a formidable sport fish (Scott and Crossman, 1973). In the United States channel catfish receive greater attention from anglers and many areas are managed to produce trophy channel catfish. In Saginaw Bay, on the U.S. side of Lake Huron, channel catfish are reported to be first or second in weight caught annually by commercial fishing, and as high as second in the number of fish caught annually by sport fishing (Haak, 1987).

Channel catfish spawn once a year in the late spring or summer when water temperatures reach a point between 24° and 29.5° C (Scott and Crossman, 1973). Channel catfish are reported to reach sexual maturity from as young as 2 years to as old as 12 years, this variation appears to be partially explained by duration of growing season with fish maturing at 6-12 years in the northern areas of its range (Hubert, 1999). The growth of channel catfish in the Ottawa River is slow compared to southerly populations, but they appear to be relatively long lived with ages up to 26 years (Haxton and Punt, 2004). Channel catfish are omnivorous and feed occasionally on a variety of plant materials including filamentous algae and plant seeds, however, the primary food of most channel catfish are invertebrate and vertebrate animals (Hubert, 1999). While information exists on the basic biology of channel catfish, little is known about the factors which limit their abundance and distribution.



Figure 1. Distribution of channel catfish in Ontario (reproduced from Mandrak and Crossman, 1992).

Open/Closed Seasons

Fishing seasons have not been applied to control angling harvest of channel catfish in Ontario. Most North American jurisdictions have an all year open season for channel catfish (Szabo, 2003). Currently, the season for channel catfish is open year round in Ontario with the exception of Divisions where there is a closure in place for all species, which were put in place for species other than channel catfish.

Table 1. Division-wide open seasons for channel catfish in Ontario (based on the 2004 Ontario Recreational Fishing Regulations Summary):

Division (s)	Open Season
1,2,3,4,5,7,8,9,10,11,12,12A,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22/22A,23,24,25,26,28,29,30,31,32,33,34	Open all year
27	January 1 – March 7 & May 20 – October 15
6	Last Saturday in April – November 15
13	Last Saturday in April – November 30

Channel catfish represent a species which can provide more angling opportunities than are currently being realized.

Recommended Season Dates:

- **As a general standard, it is recommended that the angling season for channel catfish be open year-around in fishing divisions where channel catfish are present.**
- **Fishing divisions which currently have winter closures for all species will not change.**
- **In fishing divisions where channel catfish are not present there should not be any open season.**

Based on the new Fisheries Management Zones for Ontario to be implemented in 2007, (see Appendix I) the following channel catfish seasons are recommended:

Fisheries Management Zone(s)	Open Season	Exceptions
5,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,18,19,20	Open all year	
1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9	Closed all year	
17	Last Saturday in April – November 15	
11	January 1 – March 7 & May 20 – October 15	Nipissing
15	Last Saturday in April – November 30	Algonquin Park

Catch and Possession Limits

Catch limit is defined as the number of fish an angler is allowed to catch and keep in one day. Fish which are caught and eaten that day are counted as part of the daily catch limit. The possession limit is the number of fish an angler is allowed to legally possess any time whether on-hand, in cold storage or in transit.

As of 2002, catch and possession limits were in place in 34 of 43 U.S. states where channel catfish are present (Szabo, 2003). Currently in Ontario, catch and possession limits are used to regulate the fishery for channel catfish in the Ottawa River (Division 12), with a limit of twelve (12) for holders of a Sport licence and a limit of six (6) for holders of a Conservation licence. This limit was introduced in 2003 to allow for the management of the channel catfish population in the Ottawa River.

While there is no evidence that channel catfish are being over-exploited in Ontario waters, the longevity and slow growth of northern populations suggests that they may be susceptible to over-exploitation (Haxton and Punt, 2004). Thus, the designation of catch limits will serve to place a value on the resource and provide a consistent approach to the issue of sustainable fisheries and resource limitations.

Recommended Catch and Possession Limits:

- **The provincial standard catch and possession limit will be twelve (12) channel catfish for holders of a Sport Fishing Licence and six (6) channel catfish for holders of a Conservation Fishing Licence. Where more conservative measures are required, a limit of six (6) channel catfish for holders of a Sport Fishing Licence and three (3) channel catfish for holders of a Conservation Fishing Licence could be applied.**
- **The possession limit for channel catfish is the same as one day's catch limit in order to be consistent with other fish species in Ontario.**

Size Limits

Evidence from the U.S suggests that the use of length limits is a successful way to manage heavily exploited channel catfish populations (Manns and Quinn, 1998). In Kansas, the introduction of a size limit for channel catfish resulted in an increase in the mean size for channel catfish at all sites, however catch rates did not change in a consistent fashion at all sites (Mosher, 1997).

As of 2002, minimum or slot size limits were in place as a method managing catfish populations in parts of Manitoba, Ontario and 11 out of 43 states where channel catfish were present.

In Ontario, size limits are used as a method of limiting channel catfish harvest in the Ottawa River. Only one channel catfish harvested may be greater than 55 cm (21.7 in.). This size restriction was introduced in 2003 at the same time as the catch and possession limits. Given the limited information available on this population of channel catfish, this size restriction was introduced to ensure long-term sustainability of the channel catfish population and to manage trophy-sized channel catfish.

Recommended Size Limits:

- **Minimum size limits should only be considered where there is a demonstrated need to provide additional protection to populations of channel catfish. The use of size limit regulations must be thoroughly rationalized and fully evaluated.**

Sanctuaries

Fish sanctuaries are designated areas where all fishing is prohibited. Sanctuaries can be seasonal in duration or extend for the entire year. To date, fish sanctuaries have not been used as a management tool for channel catfish in Ontario. There are no reports of using sanctuaries in channel catfish management in North America (Szabo, 2003).

Recommendations for Sanctuaries:

- **Fish sanctuaries should only be considered as a management option when it is necessary to take action to ensure the sustainability of the channel catfish resource.**

Special Regulations

Special regulations include restrictions, such as gear type, bait and fishing times. Special regulations have not been used to manage channel catfish in Ontario.

Recommendation on use of Special Regulations:

- **Generally, the use of special regulations is discouraged for channel catfish fisheries except where they are implemented on an experimental basis with plans for a thorough assessment of their relative effectiveness and a reasonable expectation for ensuring compliance so that the integrity of the experimental project is maintained.**

References

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Appendix I New Fisheries Management Zones for Ontario's Sport Fisheries