DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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RECORD LOW SEA LAMPREY CATCH IN LAKE SUPERIOR

A record low catch of 1,911 adult sea lampreys in Lake Superior this year is the most encouraging development to date in the 18-year battle to control this parasite, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

"We're now at a point where populations of this parasite are more than 90 percent lower than they were in their peak year of 1961 when sea lampreys had virtually wiped out other fish species in the Great Lakes, particularly the lake trout," Greenwalt said.

Although sea lamprey control and heavy plantings of hatchery-reared stock have restored lake trout abundance to pre-lamprey levels, the trout are just now showing faint signs of becoming self-sustaining. Naturally produced lake trout in Lake Superior, for example, now make up 5 to 6 percent of the catch. Additional reasons for optimism exist with the recent evidence of lake trout spawning in Lake Michigan.

Over the past 18 years, the Fish and Wildlife Service has operated sea lamprey assessment barriers on eight selected tributaries to Lake Superior. Annual catches at the barriers provide an index to the success of an international effort to control these parasites. The peak catch was in 1961 when 50,974 lampreys were captured. The average annual catch is around 16,000 adults.

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Adult sea lampreys are jawless fish that feed on host fishes by attaching to them with their oral sucking discs which surround rows of sharp, rasping teeth. Lampreys feed on the blood, other body fluids, and pieces of tissue of the host. Laboratory experiments indicate that an individual adult lamprey may destroy from 35 to 40 pounds of fish.

Sea lampreys are anadromous fish. Adults live in the ocean or in large freshwater lakes. Spawning takes place in tributary streams. Larval lampreys are not parasitic. They live in streams for several years and as they mature they slowly move downstream toward the ocean or lakes.

Shortly after sea lampreys invaded the upper Great Lakes (Huron, Michigan, and Superior) during the 1930's and early 1940's, the commercial fishery, particularly for lake trout and whitefish, collapsed. Lamprey wounds were found on most species of large fishes.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, acting as the U.S. agent for the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, carries out a sea lamprey control program on the Great Lakes. The Service also has a strong research program and stocks most of the hatchery lake trout planted in U.S. waters.

Early efforts during the 1950's to control the lampreys were through the use of barriers constructed near the mouths of streams. Adult lampreys were trapped on their spawning runs. By 1958, there were 132 of these devices in operation. The structures were difficult and expensive to operate and maintain. By the late 1950's chemicals were discovered that were highly toxic to larval lampreys in streams and were much less toxic to other fishes. Chemical control was highly successful and gradually replaced the barrier method.

The Fish and Wildlife Service continues to operate eight of the barriers along the south shore of Lake Superior. Barriers are operated from early April, depending on weather conditions, until July 13 of each year. Canadians carry out a similar program on Lake Huron. Annual counts of these selected lamprey runs provide an indication of the adult populations in the lakes and the success of the control program.

Although Federal lake trout stocking continues at the rate of 4.6 million annually in the upper lakes, there is evidence that natural reproduction is increasing in Lake Superior. One of the major objectives of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission and the Fish and Wildlife Service is to restore self-sustaining lake trout populations in Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Ontario.

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