

Paul Cormier was the UFRCA representative on the Fishery Advisory Council in 2013. Paul has written this response to the recent media articles about the Lake Nipissing Fishery.

## **The State of the Lake Nipissing and Upper French River Fishery**

By Paul Cormier  
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The Lake Nipissing Fishery has been an important topic of discussion among UFRCA members over the years. While fishing may not be of interest to everyone, the health of the fishery as a whole and the health of Lake Nipissing are important to all.

In the spring, summer and fall of 2016, the Upper French River and Lake Nipissing received less than usual rainfall and there was excessive heat throughout the summer. This resulted in lower water levels overall and an increase in water temperatures. These factors, along with the continued stress on the Lake Nipissing biomass from netting and sport angling in both summer and winter, have affected fishing in 2016 in many different ways.

I recently spoke with Kim Tremblay (MNR Lake Nipissing Biologist) about the Lake Nipissing Fishery. We talked about some of the findings from the MNR spring Wasi Falls netting program, winter and summer creel census, Fall Walleye Index Netting program (FWIN) and the recent third party review of the Lake Nipissing Fishery Management Plan. Our discussion first centred on the third-party independent review.

The review was commissioned in April 2016 by the province. An internationally-recognized group of scientists was asked to review walleye management practices, fishery data trends, and fishing harvests on Lake Nipissing. The group published its findings recently in a report entitled "External Review of Lake Nipissing's Walleye Fishery and Management." The review supported current direction of fisheries management practices and strategies. It also made some recommendations on management practices and enhancements to the data study of Lake Nipissing's walleye recruitment and refinements to sampling methods. The province is currently reviewing the panel's recommendations and will update its population monitoring and tracking to reflect these.

One of the enhancements to the study of the fish population is the inclusion of several locations on the French River and the more detailed study of those and all other specific sites throughout the Lake Nipissing and Upper French River Basin. So far, most data referring to Lake Nipissing offer little insight into the French River as a unique area in the Nipissing/French River water course. It is important to note that two unique fish populations may exist here: "lake walleye" and "river walleye". Studies have shown that "lake walleye" may remain in the lake throughout the year and spawn in the lake. "River walleye" may spawn exclusively in the river. Having said this, there will be considerable overlap and movement within each population. Closer study of fish in unique areas throughout the watercourse will provide better understanding of regional walleye populations in our water system – their movement and their overall health, as compared to each other.

In short, the report says that current practices are working and that the data collected on the increased walleye biomass since the new regulations were implemented in the spring of 2014 support this. I think the most important fact that may be lost in all of this is that this is a long-term plan to create a healthy and sustainable biomass over the next 10 to 20 years.

Kim Tremblay has only recently completed the FWIN survey and said that results are encouraging but not complete yet. The biomass continues its upward trend although the fishery is still a long way from healthy. In the past three years (2014, 2015 and 2016), spring netting at Wasi Falls around the same periods and for the same duration has shown increased numbers of walleye. The first year produced only several hundred walleye. In 2015 close to 2500 walleye were netted, and in 2016 over 6,000 walleye were netted. Immature male fish dominated the catch and there continues to be a lack of spawning-class female walleye.

From my personal observations, bass fishing and trophy pike and muskie fishing appear to be on the rise. Overall angling pressure appears to have reduced slightly as the likelihood of actually catching and keeping a walleye has been reduced significantly with the introduction of the new fishing regulations for Lake Nipissing in 2014. Anglers appear to be changing their fishing patterns, looking to catch larger walleye and to focus more time on other fish species.

As we look ahead, 2017, 2018 and 2019 will be important years when we may possibly begin to see a modest increase in the numbers of female spawning walleye. These will be the fish we have been throwing back since 2014; they will have hopefully entered the spawning class to create a more sustainable fishery.