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## Lake Nipissing winter fishing leaves bait dealers on thin ice



### Lake Nipissing

Submitted Photo

*Lake Nipissing winter fishing leaves bait dealers on thin ice*

Almaguin News

By [Rebecca Zanussi](#)

NIPISSING – With the ice fishing season coming to a close, Lake Nipissing businesses are taking stock.

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After the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry announced changes to the walleye slot size last March, going to a catch limit of only two pickerel above 46-centimetres, many businesses predicted a downward spiral for tourism. But some were pleasantly surprised this year.

“It wasn’t the doom and gloom that we had anticipated,” Scott Nelson, owner of Glen Echo Cottages and president of the Lake Nipissing Stakeholder’s Association, says.

“We did have some groups that said they wouldn’t come back, but the truth is times are changing and the days of overharvest should be gone. The mindset needs to change.”

**“It wasn’t the doom and gloom that we had anticipated.”  
- Scott Nelson**

Nelson says from what he’s heard, sales were down about five to ten per cent across the board, though that number depends on the operator. That figure can also vary year to year, regardless of a change by the MNRF.

Jake Lacourse, president of the North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce, says that while tourism was affected, many operators are rising to the challenge of changing the perception of Lake Nipissing.

“Lake Nipissing has been known specifically as a phenomenal pickerel lake for a very long time,” Lacourse says.

“And a lot of our marketing was centred around ‘Come fish this great walleye fishery’ so now we’re seeing our operators trying to switch the perception and trying to target those people who come up to do great northern pike fishing or even some phenomenal perch fishing as well.”

Nelson also felt a shift in how the lake was perceived.

“We find that it’s a social activity,” he says.

“And, yes, there were many people who voiced their disappointment with not being able to keep enough to eat, but the guys still said with the sheer volume they caught it was fun, they enjoyed it.”

While operators may have enjoyed a moderate season, there is one sector that saw a dramatic dip: bait dealers.

Don Bowman of Bowman’s Live Bait says his business was more tourist based than local this winter. It’s a trend he’s been experiencing for some time.

“We’ve been hearing it ever since (the catch limit) went from six to four to two, to two bigger fish,” Bowman says.

“You can just see the steady decline every year, as far as Lake Nipissing goes.”

Bowman says “nasty weather” didn’t help, with lots of wind and snow, but the catch limit regulations are what he heard most as being a contributing factor.

“Yes, people go for recreation and we all support conservation, but it gets to a point where it’s really hurting the whole area,” Bowman says.

“It’s not just the bait dealers and not just the camp operators. It’s everybody. Lake Nipissing’s a big industry.”

Another business that was hit hard was Young’s South Shore Centre, a combination bait dealer, general store, gas station, and LCBO in Nipissing.

Phyllis Young, proprietor of the centre, says the lack of bait sales affected other areas of business.

“When they come in and buy bait, they usually pick up like hot dogs and hot dog buns and chips and pop and drinks and gas for the skidoo,” she says.

“But when there’s nobody going out... A lot of people didn’t even bother putting their shack out.”

Young hasn’t crunched the numbers yet, but estimates the store’s bait sales were down more than 50 per cent over the previous year.

“It’s discouraging and very disappointing,” she says.

“I don’t know what the solution is, but I don’t think they’ve (the MNRF) have the right one.”

In the wintertime, the majority of bait sold is minnows. While certain types of fish, like bass, take other bait, they aren’t open during the ice fishing season. Perch and pike are, but that raises other issues.

“People want perch, but there were hardly any perch to be caught,” Young says. In one case she heard, people went out to fish for three days and caught one perch the entire time.

Currently the Lake Nipissing Stakeholder’s Association has no plans to lobby the MNRF for changes to the catch limit. Nelson says, however, that they do intend to put forward a proposal on restocking the walleye population.

Bowman and Young hope a solution is found soon.

“Lake Nipissing brings a pile of enjoyment and finances to the local area,” Bowman says.

“Overall I don’t think there is any of us against conservation, but it’s our livelihood. Bottom line.”

Almaguin News reporter/photographer