

Yellowstone Lake Update for “The Trout Tale” Winter 2013-2014

When the East Yellowstone Chapter in Cody entered into the fight in the fall of 2007 to “Save the Yellowstone Cutthroat” of Yellowstone Lake, they had no idea how big the project would get or how long it would take to start seeing a recovery. After all, this is a simple problem. All you have to do to recover the cutthroats is to get rid of the lake trout that were somehow introduced into the system. Seems like a pretty simple solution. The strategy also didn't seem too tough – just net out the majority of the adults and keep the rest from successfully spawning. But, 6 years later we are much wiser than we were back then.

The road has been long, sometimes difficult, sometimes frustrating, but always rewarding. The greatest rewards have been seeing the incredible support that fellow TU members, anglers, sportsmen and women, conservationists, and agency folks have demonstrated for this iconic ecosystem. With only a few exceptions, the vast majority of people that we have met refuse to accept as inevitable, the loss of this population. They have been willing to argue for its survival and to put their energy and their resources into the effort.

The struggle is far from over; but after 6 years and a huge concerted effort by all involved, we may finally be on the brink of a “recovery”. The Yellowstone National Park fisheries folks will admonish me for being too optimistic, but I can't help myself. All one has to do is look at the results of this past summer's work on the Lake to understand my optimism.

The netting crews again netted just over 300,000 lake trout. How can that be a good sign? Well, it took about 28% more effort to capture those lakers in spite of new telemetry data that helped guide those netters to the fish. This is the second year in a row that the CPUE (catch per unit effort) declined significantly. The crews continue to pursue the lakers wherever they go in the lake. They even set up what was called the “Berlin Wall” of nets around Carrington Island, where lakers are known to spawn and captured many potential spawners. Even the government shutdown didn't stop the netting as Superintendent Wenk considered this activity a “critical” service.

Meanwhile, a mark/recapture study of lake trout was conducted to finally get a true population estimate. Although the analysis isn't complete, I can tell you that 56% of the marked fish were recaptured (netted) after marking. This is very encouraging.

The telemetry study really got going full stream this past summer as a full time statistician and a technician were hired to run the study and analyze the data. Not only were these data used to guide the netting; but they were used to identify three more potential spawning areas on the Lake in addition to Carrington Island. In September, these areas were covered up in massive receiver arrays know as VPS arrays so that detailed mapping of lake trout movements within the areas could be accomplished. A total of over 125 borrowed receivers were used in these arrays. In contrast, in 2012 the Carrington Island array had 9 receivers. Although the data have not yet been analyzed, I'm confident that any spawning grounds within the boundaries will be pinpointed.

Also this past fall, the known Carrington Island spawning bed was a test site for placing egg collection baskets into the substrate. Data from these baskets will be used to learn a great deal about deposition into the substrate, hatching survival, and the ability of electro-shocking to kill those eggs. This last study phase was interrupted by the shutdown but the researchers spent the time on Swan Lake in Montana doing similar studies there which will be applicable to Yellowstone.

All of this increase in activity would not have been possible without the tremendous support that the study team received from the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust committee. This group toured the

Lake in June and subsequently awarded the effort \$150,000 for the 2013 work. And more importantly, they urged us to submit a grant for the balance of the next three years. We can't thank them enough.

And finally, the real reason for my optimism is that we are seeing a positive response in the cutthroats. Many indicators point to a small but consistent and meaningful rebound. Most telling is the distribution netting numbers for the natives. For the second year in a row, the overall numbers are up; but more importantly, the numbers of surviving juvenile cutthroats have shown significant increases. This is what we all have been striving for.

I wish I could say our work is done; but it's not. We can't let up. To slow down now would only allow a reversal of our progress. More money has to be raised to continue the work. More nets must be set to continue the downward lake trout population. More transmitters have to be inserted to monitor movements. More receiver arrays have to be established to be sure that we know "all" of the lake trout spawning areas. And, we have to continue to pursue egg and fry suppression.

Lastly, we have to ensure that the public understands why we are removing lake trout to save the native cutthroats. And, we have to ensure that the governmental agencies continue to be funded for this effort. This public relations part of the project has sometimes been the most challenging. A small, but vocal group determined to let the lake trout take over in Yellowstone Lake, has challenged the costs and direction of this project. We cannot afford to let them succeed. To that end, it is important that our legislators hear support for this project and we can use your help. You can help by writing to our legislators at the addresses below to voice your support for the direction the NPS is taking. Details on how you can support the project can be found on our www.wyomingtu.org website. Please write your letters today!

Senator Michael B. Enzi
379A Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510
<http://www.enzi.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/contact?p=e-mail-senator-enzi>

Senator John Barrasso
307 Senate Dirksen Building
Washington, DC 20510-2603
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Representative Cynthia Lummis
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