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SEA LAMPREYS REACH THIRTY-YEAR LOW IN LAKE HURON, REACH TWENTY-YEAR LOW IN LAKE MICHIGAN, AND TREND DOWNWARD IN THE OTHER LAKES

Latest assessment of sea lamprey populations is good news in the fight against the destructive, blood-sucking invader

ANN ARBOR, MI— The Great Lakes Fishery Commission today reported that abundances of destructive, invasive sea lampreys have been knocked down to a thirty-year low in Lake Huron, a twenty-year low in Lake Michigan, and to below the target level in Lake Ontario. The commission also reported that although sea lampreys are above the target levels in Lakes Erie and Superior, the trends in both lakes follow a steady five-year decline. Sea lampreys are and always will be a constant battle in the Great Lakes. Today, the Great Lakes fishery is worth \$7 billion to the people of Canada and the United States. Without sea lamprey control, the fishery would suffer significant ecological and economic harm.

“This new information about sea lamprey abundances is outstanding news,” said Dr. Robert Hecky, the commission’s chairman. “Today, sea lampreys are at their lowest levels in Lakes Huron and Michigan since 1985 and 1995, respectively. Also, after being too high in Lake Ontario for about ten years, sea lampreys are now below target levels in that lake. We still have work to do in Lakes Superior and Erie, but sea lampreys there are on a steady downward trend. We will always work aggressively to reach our targets in all lakes.”

The sea lamprey is one of the worst human-caused ecological disasters ever inflicted upon the Great Lakes. Sea lampreys invaded through shipping canals and, by 1939, were present throughout the system. They attach to Great Lakes fish with a tooth-filled, suction cup mouth and file a hole through the fish’s scales and skin with a razor-sharp tongue. The average sea lamprey will kill up to 40 pounds (18 kg) of fish during its parasitic stage. Sea lampreys prefer trout, salmon, whitefish, and sturgeon, but they also attack smaller fish like walleye and perch.

Given the tremendous damage sea lampreys caused, Canada and the United States, through the 1954 Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries, charged the Great Lakes Fishery Commission with implementing sea lamprey control and research; the commission partners with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the US Geological Survey to deliver the program. Sea lamprey control consists of several techniques including lampricides, barriers, and traps. The commission also is experimenting with sex pheromones as a way to disrupt spawning behavior. For more information about sea lampreys and control, visit www.sealamprey.org/sealamp/.

“Overall, the sea lamprey control program has been a tremendous success,” said Hecky. “Before control, sea lampreys killed an estimated 103 million pounds [47 million kilograms] of fish per year. Today, because of control, sea lampreys kill less than 10 million pounds [4.5 million kilograms] of fish per year. This control program provides fish a chance to survive long enough to spawn, be caught by humans, or live a natural life. It also allows agencies to restore stressed species and maintain thriving sport, commercial, and tribal fisheries.”

Hecky concluded: “Sea lamprey control is worth the effort and is the foundation of the fishery we enjoy today. Before control, sea lampreys caused major economic and ecological harm. Today, fish communities are on the rebound and the fishery is worth \$7 billion annually to the people of Canada and the United States.”

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GREAT LAKES FISHERY COMMISSION

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