

Canada's pristine freshwater fisheries at risk

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If you want to catch a trophy northern pike, walleye or brook trout in the northern Canadian wilderness, better plan your trip soon. That's because according to a report released today by the Wildlife Conservation Society, looming development, including forestry, mining and dam construction, threatens this pristine region of untouched forests, wetlands, lakes and streams. But the authors of the report also say that that there is still time for government officials to enact safeguards ensuring that northern fisheries remain a valuable resource for the future.

The report looks at the current status of several freshwater fish species – including popular sport fish such as brook trout, walleye, northern pike and lake trout – in far northern Ontario's boreal region, which is currently off limits to forestry. It finds that even basic information on the status of fish populations and their distribution, along with long-term habitat trends, is largely missing in this vast region.

The report also warns that measures meant to mitigate the impacts of road building, hydro-electric dams or forestry on fish populations still lack a proven track record of success, providing few assurances that these globally significant aquatic systems will be adequately safeguarded in the face of the steady northward march of development.

"WCS Canada produced this report to help inform decision makers – whether they are government ministers, planners or community members – about what is at stake for northern fisheries, and for a region that we believe is an international ecological gem," says Dr. Justina Ray,

executive director. "These are world-class fisheries that are important food sources, great recreational resources, and an economic engine for local communities across the north," she points out.

To put the importance of the northern boreal region in context, the report illustrates through new mapping that development and resource extraction in Ontario has left little ground untouched and undisturbed watersheds now occur almost exclusively in the boreal region, the area north of 51 degrees.

"The fact that this region still contains major watersheds without a single dam and few roads makes this a world renowned destination for recreational fishing and other outdoor activities, as well as a critically important refuge for sensitive species like lake sturgeon," says scientist David Browne, the author of the report. Sturgeon are considered threatened throughout almost all of their worldwide range and populations have been declining in Southern Ontario.

Unlike more developed regions in southern Ontario, fish communities of the northern part of the province remain largely unaltered by species introductions, stocking, overexploitation or pollution. In fact, the current healthy condition of fisheries in this region provides an unprecedented opportunity to conserve abundant and diverse fish communities -- a challenge that will require proactive land-use planning coupled with hard science.

Freshwater ecosystems, meanwhile, are among the most threatened ecosystems on the planet. Physical alteration, water withdrawal, overexploitation, pollution, and the introduction of non-native species have caused widespread habitat loss, degraded water quality, declines in aquatic species, and an overall loss of biodiversity. The report highlights a growing body of research that documents a number of important negative impacts to fish populations from the principal agents of change

in Ontario's northern boreal forests.

The report culminates in a series of research and policy recommendations aimed at ensuring the outlook for northern Ontario freshwater ecosystems. These include establishing a Fisheries Research and Assessment Unit for the area above the current managed forest boundary, and enhancing knowledge of the distribution and status of fish in the region, particularly those exhibiting demonstrated vulnerability to development in order to incorporate fish and aquatic considerations into conservation-based land use planning in the region.

“Ontario really has a tremendous opportunity to proactively protect these freshwater ecosystems through careful evaluation of the consequences of past activities and the safeguarding of important areas following baseline inventory. And by doing that, we also help to protect fisheries and freshwater species present there, which means the north has a great deal to gain and little to lose by taking a forward-looking approach to conservation in the northern boreal,” says Dr. Ray.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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