

Many current fishing bag limits over 50 years old

DNR biologists believe it's time they were reviewed

By Tom Dickson

In Minnesota, the bag limit for walleyes is six, for crappie it's 15, and for sunfish it's 30. Most anglers assume these numbers are based on sound biological fact and are meant to protect fish populations from overfishing. But the fact is, most bag limits were established so long ago that biologists aren't entirely sure how they were devised. "In many cases, we just don't know where the numbers came from," says Jerry Grant, a fisheries research scientist at Brainerd.

Some bag limits were established more than a half century ago. Because fishing technology and attitudes have changed so much since then, many anglers and fisheries biologists now wonder if these old limits have become outdated and need revision. What follows is a brief history of Minnesota bag limits and an overview of the changes in fishing since most bag limits were last changed.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, anglers could keep as many fish as they could catch. Back then, the state established a few legal fishing seasons—for example, you could not fish for brook trout between November 1 and March 31—and certain techniques, such as dynamite, were outlawed. But there was no bag limit. Fish populations seemed limitless.

The first bag limit in Minnesota was set in 1905. The limit was 25 fish per day, in any combination of species. At the time, pollution and overfishing had begun to deplete fish from state waters. What had once seemed like a limitless bounty in a land rich in lakes and streams was, for the first time, recognized as a finite resource in need of some protection.

Over the next several decades, fishing and conservation groups such as the Izaak Walton League of America pressed for further restrictions, and bag limits were set for individual species. Many of those bag limits were soon viewed as too high, and were lowered. But by the mid-1950s, most daily bag limits seemed set in stone: Six walleyes, 15 crappies, 6 bass, 30 panfish.

"Current bag limits are extremely old," says Grant. "Some were last changed in 1930, yet the fishing technology, pressure, and ethics have changed a lot over the past 70 years."

What changes? Consider that in 1930, when the current daily bag limit for bass (6) and crappie (15) were last lowered, a typical angler fished from a rowboat, with a cane pole or steel rod, a level-wind reel lacking a drag, spooled with thick cotton thread. On large lakes, he had to stay near shore. To find depths, he tied a rock to a string and lowered it to the bottom.

Today, an angler fishes in a boat that can handle large lakes, he uses a graphite rod with hair-thin line, can find depths and fish with a sonar unit, and can record precise locations of fish from day to day with a Global Positioning System receiver.

Yet both anglers—the one fishing during the Great Depression and an angler fishing this year—could keep 15 crappies and 6 bass per day.

Other changes between today and the 1930s are significant: The number of anglers has tripled. And the number of days fished per angler has increased, as has access to fishing lakes due to boat ramps and highways.

"Just look at any boat ramp parking lot on a Saturday morning in June," says Grant. "That continual increase in pressure has reduced average fish size. Many anglers are concerned that the current bag limits need to be reduced and are practicing catch and release. It makes you wonder if the current bag limits are too high given the changing fishing ethics."

Grant says that over the next few years the DNR will examine each bag limit to see if it needs to be lowered. "Bag limits are the most widely used regulations in the country, yet there is little information about their effects on fish populations and harvest. We plan on looking into how lowering bag limits will affect average fish size."

Grant adds that bag limits are also thought to spread the harvest among anglers, "but there is no data to support or refute this claim," he says. In fact, lower bag limits may allow the average anglers to catch more fish. "The bottom line is that bag limits have not been looked at closely for years, and it's time to take a hard look at them."



Potential Changes in Statewide Fish Limits (9/1/00)

General background:

- ❶ Most are not based on scientific research
- ❷ Generally set by defining how many fish an angler can/should keep
- ❸ Most common sportfishing regulations in North America
- ❹ Few anglers catch their limit on a given day
- ❺ May be effective at distributing fish among more anglers
- ❻ May reduce harvest during periods of high catchability
- ❼ Existing limits have not been able to maintain the quality of fishing that anglers want on many lakes
- ❽ Data suggests that bag limit reductions must generally be substantial to save significant numbers of fish

Potential benefits of limit changes:

- ❶ Remind anglers that fish are a finite resource and have value
- ❷ May reduce total harvest of some species, such as panfish
- ❸ May reduce harvest for some heavily fished species where many anglers catch their limit
- ❹ Potentially distribute fish to more anglers during periods of high catchability
- ❺ May reduce harvest during multiple-day angler trips
- ❻ Promote a conservation ethic (for example, more selective harvest)
- ❼ May play a role in reducing harvest if technology enables more anglers to catch their limit

Potential shortcomings of limit changes:

- ❶ Total harvest, size of fish, and catch rates may not be measurably changed on many waters
- ❷ Foster the public perception that limit reductions are all that is needed to improve fishing
- ❸ May negatively affect resort and bait industry economies
- ❹ May reduce angling participation or negatively affect angler behavior (for example, not comply, stringer sorting)
- ❺ Anglers may anticipate greater benefits than may actually occur
- ❻ May increase public resistance when implementing other regulations

How old are Minnesota's fish limits?

	Species/Group	Limit	Year last modified	Age
	Bass	6	1930	70
	Crappie	15	1930	70
	Northern Pike	3	1948	52
	Sunfish	30	1951	49
	Walleye / Sauger	6	1956	44
	Muskie	1	1956	44
	Lake Trout	3	1962	38
	Catfish	5	1966	34
	Stream trout	5	1975	25