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DEC Proposes Plan for Lake Ontario Cormorants and Fish

Seeks to improve public benefits of Lake Ontario's eastern basin ecosystem

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has proposed its plan to manage smallmouth bass and double-crested cormorants in U.S. waters of the eastern basin of Lake Ontario, Gerald A. Barnhart, DEC's Director of the Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources, announced today.

"Our efforts are focused on trying to improve the fishery for smallmouth bass and other warmwater species while garnering greater appreciation for the colonial waterbird resources of the Great Lakes," Barnhart said. "The local communities of Lake Ontario's eastern basin are closely tied to the natural resources of the area and derive substantial economic benefit from the fishery and from birdwatching activities as well."

Double-crested cormorants began nesting on Lake Ontario around 1945. Their population fell dramatically because of pesticide uses, including DDT. After DDT was banned, their populations began to rebound in the 1970s. Today there are approximately 12,000 breeding pairs in New York State, of which 7,500 nest on Little Galloo Island in Lake Ontario's eastern basin.

In December, DEC released a group of studies that demonstrate double-crested cormorants are significantly affecting smallmouth bass populations in Lake Ontario's eastern basin. The studies were conducted jointly by DEC staff and scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey's Biological Resources Division.

Based on scientific and public comment on the studies, DEC developed a five-year experimental management program to improve the benefits people derive from Lake Ontario's eastern basin ecosystem by:

- restoring the structure and function of the warmwater fish community;
- reducing the negative impacts of double-crested cormorants on nesting habitats and other colonial waterbird species;
- improving the quality of smallmouth bass and other fisheries; and
- fostering a greater appreciation for Great Lakes colonial waterbird resources.

Specifically, DEC's plan seeks to limit the number of nesting pairs of cormorants on Little Galloo Island to 1,500. This cormorant density should allow the smallmouth bass population to recover to 1980s levels, when the fishery flourished. The 1,500 nesting pair target equates to an eastern basin cormorant population of more than 6,000 birds, which will provide sighting

opportunities for birders.

In 1999, DEC plans to:

- evaluate the impact of the lethal destruction of 300 adult cormorants from Little Galloo Island as part of a continuing effort to analyze the birds' stomach contents and to begin to determine impacts lethal controls on the cormorant population and on other colonial waterbirds present on the island; and
- reduce the number of successful cormorant nests on Little Galloo Island 90 percent by oiling eggs.

The results of the 1999 efforts will be used to determine how best to achieve DEC's overall cormorant population goal. "During 1999, we plan to evaluate ways to reduce the number of double-crested cormorants while not disturbing other colonial waterbirds, like the Caspian tern," Barnhart said.

Barnhart said that in addition to seeking to reduce cormorant populations, DEC will further restrict angling on smallmouth bass to help rebuild the population. This will include proposing to change the opening day of bass season for the Jefferson County portion of eastern Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River from the third Saturday in June to the last Saturday in June. It is anticipated the new regulation will take effect in October 2000.

Other actions DEC will take to achieve its goals include:

- promoting the catch and release of legal size smallmouth bass;
- enhancing enforcement of regulations prohibiting fishing during the closed season for smallmouth bass, especially during the spawning and nesting period;
- preparing a draft management plan for the Little Galloo Island Wildlife Management Area and other eastern basin islands by April 1, 2000, and adopting and implementing the plan by April 1, 2001;
- continuing off-shore barge stocking of brown and lake trout in eastern Lake Ontario;
- continuing to stock steelhead in early spring prior to the return of cormorants; and
- continuing to restrict nesting of double-crested cormorants to Little Galloo Island.

Barnhart made it clear that DEC's proposed actions must not be construed as condoning the illegal act of individuals who killed approximately 850 cormorants this past summer on Little Galloo Island. DEC continues to work with the U.S. Attorney's office on the case.