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WILDLIFE

Have Your Bass Stopped Growing? What You Do Next Depends on Your Goal

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When growing largemouth bass or other sport fish in your lake, pond or other impoundment, there are times when a “stunted fishery” may occur.

This is a situation when the majority of a species have stopped growing and remain similar in size, usually because

there is not enough forage to feed an overabundance of fish in a given size class. Many impoundment managers and bass anglers view a stunted

bass fishery as a negative. That’s understandable, since fishing in a stunted population usually results in caught bass averaging approximately 7 to 12 inches and weighing less than a pound. So if fishing for quality largemouth bass is an important goal for an impoundment, managers need strategies in place to avoid or remedy a stunted fishery.

On the other hand, if growing trophy sport fish is not the primary goal, a stunted fishery is not a problem and even can be an advantage for some types of fishing. Each impoundment manager needs to determine whether a stunted bass fishery is right for his or her goals, and manage accordingly.

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BEST PRACTICES FOR MANAGING BASS FISHERIES FOR TROPHY FISHING

1. Survey the population.

To ensure plenty of quality, trophy largemouth bass in an impoundment, the first step is to survey the population.

Refer to the Noble Research Institute publication *How to Survey the Fish in Your Pond* at www.noble.org/survey-pond and follow the protocol to determine the fish species present, their size distribution and relative abundance in the impoundment.

Keep records of how many of each size are caught by location to track and evaluate the status of your fish populations.

2. Remedy a stunted bass fishery, if needed.

If the survey reveals a stunted population, impoundment managers have several options to consider, depending on the conditions present.

You may need to stock bluegill to increase the food source for the bass, if bluegill are low in number or absent from the impoundment.

Another solution is to address low fertility in an impoundment by fertilizing the water to increase the microscopic plants (phytoplankton) that make up the base of the food chain.

In some cases, managers may need to remove adequate numbers of stunted fish to allow the desired trophy fish to grow. Note that

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increasing average size of bass by removal is easier in smaller impoundments than larger ones because of the labor involved in removing surplus fish. With that being said, be aware that it is easier to overfish smaller impoundments.

When bass removal is appropriate, follow these steps:

- The general rule of thumb is to start by removing 10 pounds of stunted fish per surface acre of the impoundment.
- The following year, survey the fishery to determine whether there was an increase in average length of caught fish. If there is no change, increase removal of bass to 15 pounds per surface acre.
- Continue increasing the harvest rate each year, until a change is noted.

In one 16-acre impoundment, the manager was able to increase the average length and weight of caught bass by three-fourth inch and one-quarter pound, respectively, after removing 17 pounds of stunted bass per acre for two consecutive years.

KEEP A BASS FISHERY STUNTED FOR OTHER GOALS

Stunted bass fisheries can have several positives:

- They are excellent places to introduce someone to fishing or to take young anglers. Due to the high number of fish in the impoundment, catch rate is usually good, which helps maintain the attention of beginning or young anglers.
- They provide a place for anyone to have fun with light fishing tackle or fly fishing.
- They can help control the young of typically undesirable fish, such as bullheads.
- They are often desirable when managing for trophy-size bluegill, hybrid sunfish or redear sunfish.

If you have one of the above goals and your impoundment already has a stunted bass population, keep the status quo.

If you wish to create a stunted bass fishery in an impoundment where there currently are varying bass sizes, remove most bass that are 12 inches or longer when caught. 🐟