

BASS LENGTH LIMITS

Each year Oklahoma anglers fish for largemouth bass more than any other species. Because fishing is so important, Wildlife Department biologists have developed a detailed, comprehensive Black Bass Management Plan. Length limits are an important tool used in this program to implement high quality bass fishing in our state's rivers, lakes and reservoirs.

Every lake has a certain quantity of bass that it can support. Stocking bass in a lake that has already reached its "carrying capacity" will not improve the bass population or bass fishing. Restrictive regulations, such as length limits, do not produce more bass but do protect fish to a larger, higher quality size. This is especially true if more fish are being harvested than the lake can replace each year.

SELECTIVE HARVEST vs. CATCH AND RELEASE

Bass angling groups have advocated catch and release of largemouth bass for several years. The release of certain sizes of bass, either voluntarily by anglers concerned with maintaining quality fishing or mandated through length limit regulations, is vital for managing the species. Maintaining an optimal density of large predators in a lake is not only necessary to provide a quality fishery, but is essential to preserving the predator-prey balance of the lake or reservoir.

Some bass populations need to have a portion of the small fish removed to promote growth and allow for the remaining fish to reach the size desired by most bass anglers. These populations are typically characterized by consistently large spawns and high survival of young bass. The result under a catch-and-release ethic is usually slow growth with few individuals getting larger than 12-to-14 inches. The concept of "selective harvest," as advocated by "In-Fisherman" magazine, calls for removing only surplus fish in a particular size range. This usually means harvesting the small bass and returning larger individuals to either improve angling quality or improve the predator-prey balance. For example, by removing the 10- to 12-inch bass, the number of small bass can be balanced with the food supply, improving growth and resulting in more large bass than if all bass were returned to the lake.

14-INCH MINIMUM LENGTH LIMIT

Many of Oklahoma's reservoirs have a 14-inch minimum length limit placed on their bass populations. This regulation requires that all bass under 14 inches must be immediately returned to the lake. Bass population density, reproduction and survival of young bass in these lakes are typically low to moderate. However, growth is usually average or better. These lakes do not have a surplus of small bass and biologists feel that

too many small bass are being harvested by anglers prior to reaching a quality size. The length limit is intended to increase the predator density, thus making better use of larger shad in the lake and to increase the number of large bass.

Good growth rates are essential to the success of minimum length limits. Increasing the density of small bass under the minimum size must not lead to a decrease in growth. Biologists evaluate the food supply for these smaller bass to ensure that growth will not decline under the 14-inch minimum length limit regulation.

13-16 INCH SLOT LENGTH LIMIT

This regulation requires anglers to return all bass between 13 and 16 inches immediately to the lake. Anglers are permitted to harvest bass under 13 inches and over 16 inches. The bass fishery on lakes being managed using a 13- to 16-inch slot length limit are usually characterized by large numbers of small bass with slow to average growth. Consequently, too many bass are produced for the food supply available. Poor growth and body condition results and few large bass are produced. When anglers harvest these small bass to reduce their density, those individuals remaining will have more food and, therefore, improved growth. The concept of "selective harvest" ties in well with slot length limit regulations.

Lakes with high densities of small bass would not be improved if a minimum length limit was imposed on them. Minimum length limits require anglers to return all bass under a certain length, usually 14 inches. In this case, catch and release actually compounds the problem by increasing the density of these small bass. Under these circumstances, the bass usually stop growing at the size just under the minimum length limit with few fish ever becoming legal for anglers to harvest.

WHY SOME LAKES HAVE SPECIAL HIGH MINIMUM OR SLOT LENGTH LIMITS

The Wildlife Department is using two special bass length limits in an effort to provide trophy bass fishing opportunities. The 22-inch minimum and the 16- to 22-inch slot length limit are applied at lakes with the potential for producing good numbers of trophy bass (over 8 pounds). Bass in these lakes have a history of excellent growth and Florida largemouth bass stockings have been successful in introducing fish with the genetic potential to attain larger sizes. The 22-inch minimum length limit is applied on lakes where bass populations exhibit excellent growth and have the proper genetic makeup, but have low to moderate abundance (survival of small bass is limited).

The 16- to 22-inch slot length limit is applied to lakes with very abundant bass populations, good growth rates and the high percentage of Florida genes necessary to produce large numbers of trophy bass. As with any slot length limit regulation, the harvest of sub-slot-sized bass is encouraged to thin the population and reduce competition among slot-sized fish, allowing them to grow even faster to trophy size.

WHY SOME LAKES HAVE NO LENGTH LIMITS

In many lakes, biologists have determined that bass are abundant and the population is healthy and well balanced with adequate forage for all sizes of predators. Reproduction, survival and growth of bass is good and numbers are sufficient to withstand harvest (within the six-fish-per-day creel limit) without hurting the overall population.

HANDLING AND RELEASING ILLEGAL-SIZED BASS

Play fish quickly and land them by hand. Grasp bass firmly by the lower jaw and hold vertically, supporting large fish with a hand under the belly. Avoid using a hard nylon mesh landing net (soft nylon or rubber nets don't scrape off the bass' protective slime coating as quickly). Avoid excess handling and wet your hands first so you don't remove slime coating. Remove hooks quickly with as little tissue damage as possible - use pliers or a hook disgorger to help remove hooks. Cut the line and leave the hook if it is deep in the throat, gills, or stomach - the hook will rust away quickly. When a bass is bleeding from being hooked in the gills or throat, remove the hook if possible and release the fish quickly. The clotting process will stop the bleeding when the fish is back in its own environment. Release the bass by gently lowering it back into the water - never toss or throw them back into the lake. Detailed information on bass handling can be found on the Departments web site at <http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/fishing/hookout.htm>

The Wildlife Department can set length limits based on the needs of each bass population, yet improved quality in fishing depends on the willingness of anglers to comply with these regulations. Remember, there is no statewide length limit regulation on bass in Oklahoma. Check your Oklahoma Fishing Regulations to see if your favorite bass lake has a length limit. Bass fishing doesn't improve overnight. However, with angler cooperation, length limits can provide better and more exciting fishing opportunities.