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History of Fisheries

The fish found in present-day Alberta first entered the province about 13,000 years ago, toward the end of the most recent ice age (Prepas and Mitchell 2002, Joynt and Sullivan 2003). Retreat of the ice-age glaciers allowed waterbodies in Alberta to become connected to the biologically rich Great Lakes and Mississippi River, via the North and South Saskatchewan rivers and the now-vanished Glacial Lake Edmonton and Glacial Lake Agassiz. As a result of these hydrologic connections, fish species in Alberta are more similar to those in Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan than to those in British Columbia.

Because fish species native to Alberta are those that immigrated from distant ecosystems, they are quite tolerant of variable conditions (Prepas and Mitchell 2002). Despite this robustness, fish populations have been threatened by high fishing pressure as well as changes in habitat due to human activity and changing climates. Trout are now stocked in certain waterbodies to maintain ecologically productive population levels and to increase opportunities for fishing.

Intensive fisheries management in Alberta has developed only in the last few decades. Early settlers in the province regarded the natural resources of the region, including fish, as endless. Serious fish stock problems became evident in the latter part of the 20th century, when fish resources and fishers began to be monitored; the first general sportfishing licenses were issued in 1956, likely to assist with determining the number of anglers in the province (AENV and ASRD 2002). At the time, fisheries biologists were required to prove that fish populations were being depleted before management actions to protect stocks could be implemented. Fish populations at risk were further depleted during the time required to gather data. Today, however, fisheries management employs "precautionary management", where conservation of fish populations is the highest priority, and fish harvesting is allowed only if there is a surplus fish population (AENV and ASRD 2002).

The commercial fishery in Alberta began in the late 1800s, with the first commercial fishing license issued in 1910. Commercial fisheries in the early to mid 1900s targeted lake whitefish and goldeye, and catches have been regulated since 1917 (Park 2007). Lake whitefish had high market value because of its excellent quality when dried. Between 1940 and 1970, commercial fishing was conducted primarily in Lake Athabasca, the Athabasca River and other smaller rivers and lakes in the northern region around Aboriginal communities. Since then, it has expanded throughout the province with large fisheries in Lake Athabasca, Lesser Slave Lake, Cold Lake and Lac LaBiche.

Domestic fishing by Aboriginal people (First Nations and Métis) to supply food for their families and animals (e.g., sled dogs) has taken place since the arrival of these peoples in Alberta. During hunting and trapping trips, nets would be placed in rivers and lakes and checked every day (ACFN 2003). Fish captured during winter and spring months were eaten fresh, while fish captured during summer and fall months was dried and stored to eat in the winter, with a large share fed to sled dogs (Tanner and Rigney 2003). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the snowmobile replaced dog teams, subsistence fishing during summer and fall decreased.



A large pike caught on the Athabasca River.

Source: Nexen
(click to enlarge)



Fishing boat

Source: Tim Abercrombie
(click to enlarge)

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