

Other Resources

FISH AND WILDLIFE

Fish and wildlife are extremely important resources within the Priest River Basin. The basin provides valuable habitat for several species of concern, and is a popular hunting and fishing area for residents of northern Idaho and eastern Washington.

Fisheries and Fish Habitat

Priest Lake is the most popular fishery within the basin, and one of the more popular fisheries in the Idaho Panhandle. Angler use, however, has declined overall since the 1970's, when kokanee were abundant and supported the primary fishery. Total angler effort in 1994 was 62,602 hours (Davis et al., 2000). Most of the fishing effort is from boat anglers in search of lake trout. In 1994, only 49 percent of the anglers were residents of Idaho. Between January 1, 1994 and December 31, 1994 an estimated 13,987 lake trout were harvested from Priest Lake. The average length of lake trout in the catch was approximately 20 inches, weighing about 2.25 pounds (L. Nelson, IDFG - Coeur d'Alene, personal communication).

Kokanee salmon once supported a thriving fishery in Priest Lake. For 30 years the kokanee population was the major fishery in the lower lake supporting the harvest of 100,000 fish annually. However, several factors lead to the eventual collapse of the kokanee fishery by 1975. The establishment of mysis shrimp by the early 1970's enhanced the survival of young lake trout increasing the lake trout population. Predation on kokanee and native cutthroat and bull trout populations increased, putting those populations at risk. Drawdown in the fall caused an additional impact to kokanee by dewatering redds along shoreline spawning areas. The kokanee population was considered functionally extinct by the late 1980's.

In the late 1990's, anglers started noticing a few kokanee spawning along the shoreline. This population continued to build and in 2001, Idaho Department of Fish and Game counted over 1,700 shoreline spawners and over 1,800 in 2002 (N. Horner, IDFG – Coeur d'Alene, personal communication). Increased numbers of spawning kokanee were very encouraging, but drawdowns after early November dewatered significant numbers of kokanee redds. Priest Lake kokanee spawn at least two weeks earlier than the stocks in Lake Pend Oreille and Coeur d'Alene Lake.

Other game fish present in Priest Lake include westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, mountain whitefish, pygmy whitefish and a few largemouth bass and yellow perch. The westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout are designated species of special concern in Idaho and no harvest of either fish is permitted in Priest or Upper Priest lakes. The bull trout and cutthroat trout found in both Priest and Upper Priest lakes are adfluvial. Adfluvial fish reside in the lake environment after maturity, but migrate to tributary streams to spawn. The young remain in streams for two to five years, then migrate to the lakes. Limited numbers of largemouth bass and yellow perch are scattered along the shallow littoral areas of the shoreline and in the bays of the lower lake.

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission approved the 2001-2006 Statewide Fish Management Plan with emphasis on restoring a fishery for kokanee, native cutthroat trout and bull trout in Priest Lake. This plan emphasized increase harvest of lake trout and protecting the existing kokanee population with a harvest closure. Completion of fall water releases by November 1 would compliment the kokanee restoration program by reducing the dewatering of kokanee redds.

Upper Priest Lake supports the last best population of native game species including westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, mountain whitefish, pygmy whitefish and a small, naturally sustaining kokanee population. Lake trout invaded Upper Priest Lake during the early 1990's and an increasing population is placing other game fish at risk. Harvest of lake trout from Upper Priest Lake was permitted in 2002.

The Upper Priest River, its tributaries, and tributaries to Priest and Upper Priest lakes provide valuable fish spawning and rearing habitat. All streams are managed with catch-and-release regulations for cutthroat, but harvest of brook trout is allowed. Fishing for bull trout is not allowed due to the listing of bull trout as a Threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1998. Many of these streams are also designated protected areas for resident fish by the Northwest Power Planning Council (Fig.2, pg. vii). Northwest Power Planning Council (NPPC) designations must be considered by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) in their hydropower project authorization processes and by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) when acquiring and transmitting power.

Snorkel surveys for selected tributaries to Priest and Upper Priest lakes suggest that the westslope cutthroat trout and brook trout populations in the surveyed tributary streams are generally stable. Granite Creek and South Fork Granite Creek are two tributaries where trout densities were down from previous estimates (Table 10).

Bull trout redd surveys began in the Priest River drainage in 1985. Twelve tributaries to Upper Priest Lake have been surveyed since 1992 with redd count totals ranging from 12 to 58 redds, with an average of 32 redds counted per year. For comparison, 80 redds were counted in 1985 in less than half of the area surveyed since 1992. Bull trout redds have also been counted in the Middle Fork East River (tributary to the Priest River below Priest Lake) and its tributary Uleda Creek in 2001 (seven redds total) and 2002 (12 redds total). The East River bull trout are the only known outlet spawner in Idaho. They spend their adult life in Lake Pend Oreille, but utilize the East River drainage for spawning and rearing.

Within the lower basin (downstream of Priest Lake), only the Middle and North Forks of the East River, and Moores Creek are designated by the NPPC as protected areas for resident fisheries and wildlife. The Middle Fork of the East River is the only drainage in the lower part of the basin to support bull trout. The Priest River contains only limited populations of wild trout due to low stream discharges and elevated water temperatures during summer low-flows. Stream habitat in other tributaries to the Priest River is limited, often due to land use practices.

Plan Amendments

OUTLET STRUCTURE OPERATION

The Board will develop an operating plan for fall releases from the Priest Lake Outlet Structure. The plan will be developed with input from IDFG, IDPR, Avista (formerly Washington Water Power) and the Lake Pend Oreille, Pend Oreille River, Priest Lake and Priest River Commission, and will consider the following guidelines:

1. Fall discharge will be gradually ramped up by increasing the release from the outlet structure no more than 1,200 cfs in a 24-hour period.
2. The fall release will not commence prior to October 1. If possible, the release will not commence until after the second weekend in October to support fall clientele at the west-side resorts.
3. The level of Priest Lake will be at or near its natural (unregulated) level by the time kokanee commence spawning in early November.
4. IDWR will work with Avista to give notice of the fall release schedule two weeks prior to commencement.
5. The operating plan for fall releases from Priest Lake will be reviewed on an annual basis and will be consistent with Idaho Code, Sec 70-501 through 70-507.
6. IDFG will collect data regarding kokanee redd counts, depths and locations of redds, and spawning times. This information will be used to help determine the date in November when the natural (unregulated) lake level should be achieved.