



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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The disaster which wiped out uncounted millions of Great Lakes smelt last year is believed to have been so complete that in all probability none at all will be taken this spring when smelt normally swarm into the tributary streams of Lake Michigan and other Great Lakes, the Office of the Coordinator of Fisheries reported today.

The smelt, small silvery fish related to the salmon family, normally provide a catch of about five million pounds by commercial fishermen, plus perhaps two or three times as much taken by amateur fishermen at the time of the spring spawning runs.

Last winter the first indication of serious mortality among the smelt was noticed in southern Lake Michigan, at a time when fishermen in the northern part of the lake were making their usual large catches through the ice.

As the winter progressed the mysterious epidemic spread northward throughout Lake Michigan and into the other Great Lakes with the result that not more than a million pounds were caught in the entire area.

Dr. John Van Oosten, Area Coordinator of Fisheries for the Great Lakes, reported recently that the only smelt catch he had heard of this winter was that of a single fisherman who took two pounds - about 20 fish--from his nets.

Another indication that the smelt have been practically wiped out is the fact that last summer scientists found none in the stomachs of lake trout, which normally prey on smelt during the summer, Dr. Van Oosten said.

Reports from the State of New York indicate that the smelt died out in the Finger Lakes also last winter.

Although a large number of the fish were examined by pathologists for traces of disease, no clue to the cause of the mysterious epidemic has been found.

Smelt are not native to the Great Lakes but were introduced from New England in 1906. From initial plantings of about sixteen million eggs in Crystal Lake, Michigan, they multiplied and spread throughout the Great Lakes area. The center of the commercial fishery is now Lake Michigan, and more specifically the Green Bay area.

Not only commercial fishermen but amateurs of all ages for many years have looked forward to the annual spawning runs of the smelt. Some time between mid-March and mid-April, or as soon as the ice broke up in the streams, the smelt in previous years have entered the tributaries of the lakes in enormous numbers and were scooped up in dipnets by smelt enthusiasts who lined the banks. Since the smelt ran chiefly at night, the dipping continued throughout the night, and large bonfires were built on the banks.

The smelt has been considered one of the choicest of panfishes and carload lots were shipped to New York, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and other cities.

Whether some remnant of the Great Lakes smelt population has escaped destruction and may eventually restore the fishery is unknown.