

Summary of Activities

Date: November 2017

To: Leah Cole FWEF Administrator & Sheilagh Monchak, Senior Policy Analyst Manitoba Sustainable Development

From: Holly Urban, Project Manager Swan Valley Sport Fishing Enhancement [\(swanvalleysportfish@gmail.com\)](mailto:swanvalleysportfish@gmail.com)
(204) 734-8836

Re: Intermediate Report - Project 16-019 West Watjask Lake - Musky Introduction

Location: West Watjask Lake, Duck Mountain, MB 14 U 330721 5724743

History: At a time when musky are hard to find in the province of Manitoba, there was no-doubt an initiative to re-introduce muskellunge to the Duck Mountains would become very popular province wide. Thanks to the funding received from the Fisheries and Wildlife Enhancement Fund, SVSFE was able to purchase spotted muskellunge from Minnesota for stocking West Watjask Lake in the Duck Mountains.

Once the word was out of the possible return of musky to the Ducks, the feedback was remarkable. SVSFE was contacted by several sport fish groups interested in supporting the initiative including Manitoba Fly Fisherman Association (Bruce Cameron) and the Canadian Esox Association (Ron Edwards), along with recognition in both the MLOA and Hooked Magazines.

MUSKIE COMING TO WESTMAN

The mighty muskellunge is about to make its long-awaited return to Western Manitoba.

In the spring of 2017, the non-profit Swan Valley Sportfishing Enhancement organization will be stocking 450 twelve-inch muskies into West Watjask Lake. The lake, along with its twin, East Watjask (pronounced Way-jask) Lake, is located on the western slope of Duck Mountain, not far from the Madge Lake Junction, which leads to nearby Saskatchewan.

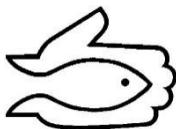
Both lakes, connected by an on-again-off-again creek, are currently home to well-established populations of smallish perch. Provincial fisheries biologists first identified these lakes as potential muskie habitat in the mid-1990s, said Jeff Connolly, president of SVSFE. At one point a transfer of muskie from the nearby Twin Lakes was planned, but a pre-aeration winter kill there cancelled the plans, he said. Another winter kill on Line Lake later wiped out muskie in the Duck Mountain area and Westman altogether.

Twenty years later, SVSFE is undertaking a \$23,000-project to establish a breeding population of spotted muskie in West Watjask Lake. The foot-long fish are set to arrive 100% certified disease-free, from a fish farm in Minnesota. Holly Urban, project manager with SVSFE, said the fish are expected to grow relatively quickly, feasting on the small perch, and potentially even helping out that population by encouraging the growth of fewer, but larger perch. However, exactly how the muskies will fare and whether they will begin breeding remains to be seen.

Urban said she hopes anglers will consider giving the new lake residents a break, and a chance to establish themselves, during the

2017 season. "We want them to survive past that first year," she said, noting SVSFE will be assessing the growth of the fish next fall. Connolly said the group is hoping for a total catch-and-release regulation to be set for muskie on the lake, but the regulation has not yet been approved or passed by the province. Urban said if the project proves successful, they may look at stocking muskie into East Watjask Lake as well. The Watjask Lakes are located 8 km off Hwy 83, down a gravelled logging road. There is no boat launch and none is planned, but some angling infrastructure is in the works.





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BY KEN KANSAS

In the early 90's I was tasked to look after fish populations in the Western Region of Manitoba. I realized that this part of Manitoba was in the 'Stocked Trout Belt' and had seen tens of thousands of trout stocked into area lakes, many without follow-up. Therefore, I asked the veteran biologist of the area to give me a list of all the lakes they had stocked with specific objectives for each waterbody. Things like; "we stocked 2000 fingerling Rainbow trout in X Lake and we'd like to know their status" and, "X Creek has received 1000 Brook trout every year for five years. Go see if they've established yet."

About two years later after completing most of my investigations, I came across one for Twin Lakes (yes, the same Twin Lakes that now is a trophy catch and release only Tiger trout fishery). The data request listed some brown trout stockings in the late 80's but I wanted an update on this lake. With my friend and colleague NRO Glen Vandorne (AKA Wolf), we accessed the lake off an old trail and pushed out a little 12' tinner, loaded with nets and various tools of the trade to kick-start our gig. As we drifted across the milfoil, all yang and yang like, I spotted what looked like to be about a 24" pike hovering, looking extra sleek and steel in the gin clear water not even eight feet off the stern.

"Look at that Wolf", I hissed. "It's a

slough shark... Those trout are trout. A minute... vertical bars, wha?". I had never seen a Muskie in real life.

Sure enough, Twin Lakes was full of ~25" Muskie. No trout. Just Muskie, Belostomids and Fathead minnows. So they were stocked a couple years before the Brown trout. Imagine that. Those Browns must have disappeared faster than a 24 of Blue at an old timer's hockey game. Regardless, we had a unique fishery to work with and we were both super pumped.

There was a problem though. Twin Lakes data historically showed marginally winter dissolved oxygen readings and further monitoring showed the same. the mean time I found a suitable lake more than these fish to that had nothing but stunted Yellow perch, approximately two miles north. The plan was to move them the following spring but Mother Nature had a different plan. All those Minnow averaging 30", sadly did not make it through the winter.

DISTRIBUTION AND BIOLOGY

The Muskellunge (*Esox masquinongy*) one of Canada's largest freshwater fish. Its original geographic range is eastern North America and in Canada the western range restricted to a few areas in NW Ontario.

Muskellunge generally spawn when water is between 9 and 15 Celsius, usually over heavily vegetated and flooded areas in about 1 - 2 meters of water. Egg incubation and hatching occurs in 8 - 14 days

depending on water temperatures.

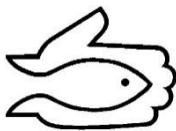
One of the Muskellunge's biggest competitors from day one is the Northern Pike. Pike spawns about a week before Muskie. This puts them at an advantage. Both species utilize very similar spawning habitats which have very low dissolved oxygen at the bottom associated with the muck and detritus. Pike have adapted with a specialized sucker type membrane on the top of their heads which allows them to attach to vegetation and therefore avoidance of poorly oxygenated habitat at the bottom. Muskellunge do not have this special 'membrane', however they have adapted in another way. Likely as an effort to avoid predation by more advanced pike fry, musky eggs drop right to the bottom and have adapted to the normally extreme low dissolved oxygen levels at this location. This was pointed out to me by Mike Dombeck, whom I had the chance to take fly fishing in our Parkland area. Mike at the time was the Chief of the US Forest Service under the Clinton Administration who completed his Masters Thesis on the early life history of Muskellunge in Minnesota.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Fast forward 17 years from that bad news on the loss of the Twin Lakes Muskie by winterkill. It seems my old files were perused by SVSFE Fisheries staff Holly Urban and company. Seems that potential transfer had some teeth, and the recipient lake looked good. It is relatively small but full of stunted perch and hadn't winterkilled in at least 30 years. SVSFE worked with Fisheries Branch and decided to purchase certified disease free muskellunge up to 12 inches long. These will then be moved to the recipient lake and a no-kill regulation will apply. Awesome. If all goes well this will happen in the next 5 or 6 months. I love it when a plan comes together, even 17 years later. ■

to anglers.

During the mid-1980's the western region of Manitoba received muskellunge from Minnesota and these fish were again stocked in various locations which included these lakes; Beautiful, Lime, Perch, Pleasant Valley Reservoir, Shallow, Sin-



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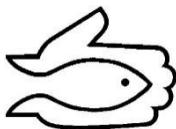
Project Activities to Date - 2017 Musky Stocking:

The original shipment of 100% disease free spotted muskellunge was scheduled to arrive in the fall of 2016. Unfortunately, Rob Jost, owner and operator of Minnesota Musky Farms in Alexandria, Minnesota was not satisfied with the growth of his stock and recommended over-wintering the 450 fish until the spring of 2017. SVSFE was satisfied with the proposal as spring stocking was the original recommendation in the stocking plans. Yet again, come spring, more bad news from the musky farm. There was a high case of mortality in the overwintered stock and only 35 fish remained.

The SVSFE board agreed to pursue with the stocking of the 35 fish, as technical staff would be in Winnipeg for training during the time of the suggested transfer. In hindsight, this was a very beneficial decision. The permitting process on both parties (Canadian and US sides) was more than anticipated from when initial inquiries were made with government officials and border crossing agencies. Due to the previously stocking delays, there were some permits which required several renewals. Also the supplier was not aware of the extra costs involved in the exporting process which included a veterinary inspection in addition to their disease free certification. Luckily, this practice run has educated both parties on the requirements for transporting fish over international borders and will aid in the future shipment of the remaining fish destined for West Watjask Lake.

On the morning of June 22, 2017, SVSFE technicians met at the Emerson border crossing to receive the 35 spotted muskellunge. The fish were initially packed for transport at 5am, arrived at the border at approximately 9am and arrived at West Watjask Lake at 6pm, equating to a 13 hour journey. The fish were packed in oxygenated bags within coolers. All 35 were healthy and average 260mm (10") in fork length. In order to efficiently scatter stock the musky, SVSFE had a volunteer (past summer student) meet at the lake access point with a quad, boat & motor and gear. The fish did not require tempering as the lake water and transport water were with 0.7 of a degree. Fish were scattered throughout the lake in seven different locations.





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Financial Review:

Currently, SVSFE has spent slightly over \$1000 on the project. The purchase of the 35 fish equated to \$409.01 or \$11.68/fish CDN. The remaining ~\$600 included travel expenses for transport (\$373.25), permits (\$125.86) and administration supplies/communication on the project (\$139.69). This leaves ~\$8,800 in the project budget for future stocking.

	Budgeted	Expended	Remaining
Admin/Permits	\$750.00	\$265.55	\$484.46
Musky (Cost & Delivery)	\$9,125.00	\$782.26	\$8,342.74
Total	\$9,875.00	\$1,047.81	\$8,827.20

Project Completion: In order to complete the project, SVSFE is still waiting on the shipment of the remaining musky. This was scheduled to occur in the fall of 2017, but this time around weather was not in our favor. The Minnesota Musky Farm would not be draining their rearing ponds until late fall and by that time our lakes were frozen over. Owner, Rob Jost, stated he would again overwinter the musky for SVSFE and schedule the transfer for the spring of 2018. There is some uncertainty of how many musky will actually be available come spring, therefore SVSFE is currently sourcing other available musky suppliers in order to complete this valued musky re-introduction to the Duck Mountains.

In regards to the development of the boat launch and dock, road improvements and signage, SVSFE is currently working with local logging companies who are operating in the area, government and interested partners on the design and construction plans. This component of the project is anticipated to start in 2019 (following the shipment of musky).

