Study finds fish-care guidelines result in release of healthy bass.

Bass Tournament Study Weighs In on Club Impact

Story By Matthew VanLandeghem, David Wahl and Cory Suski

For countless people in Illinois and throughout the nation, many hours are spent on the water every year enjoying fishing for largemouth bass. For some, the pursuit of this tenacious fighter is taken to another level by competitively angling in bass tournaments.

Bass tournaments not only provide an outlet for anglers to test their skills against one another, but also have a positive impact on the local economy: Millions of dollars are spent by tournament anglers every year on lodging, food, fuel and tackle in communities near tournament lakes. Healthy bass fisheries provide a quality fishing experience for recreational and tournament anglers alike, and also are good for local economies.

Tournament angling is a little different than typical catch-and-release fishing and can present fish with a few unique challenges.

When bass are caught during tournaments, they are held in aerated livewells aboard boats, often for several hours, then weighed at the end of the tournament day before being released. The winner of the tournament is determined by the total weight of his/her catch.

Fish care is a priority as anglers incur weight penalties for fish that are in poor health, which can affect their final standing and prizes. Tournaments have been studied by researchers for the last few decades to understand their impact on fish and fish populations and to ensure that they are conducted in a sustainable fashion. This research has led to improvements in fish care and a series of conservation improvements that keep fish healthy during a tournament.

After a long day of tournament fishing, anglers report to weigh-in with largemouth bass meeting the minimum length limit. Fish are kept in aerated livewells, with penalties applied to anglers holding fish in poor condition.

Most of the studies of tournament improvements to date, however, have been carried out at large tour events (100-plus anglers), while smaller, club-style tournaments (fewer than 100 anglers) have generally been overlooked.

Club-style tournaments are numerous in Illinois, but it is not known whether these smaller events have effects on fish and fish populations that are similar to larger events and if specific guidelines for small tournaments could be adopted to ensure they are conducted in a fish-friendly manner. To address these ques-

tions, researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Illinois Natural History Survey collaborated with the Strike King Ever-Bloom Tournament Trail to conduct a study at Evergreen and Bloomington lakes (McLean County).

At Evergreen Lake, researchers employed a series of submerged holding pens to hold tournament-caught largemouth bass for three days to assess their condition following the conclusion of four tournaments held during early spring, early summer, mid-summer and fall. After three days of monitoring, all but one of the 96 fish caught during the four Evergreen Lake tournaments were released healthy and alive, demonstrating the quality of fish care during these tournaments.

Another unique way researchers from the INHS and University of Illinois were able to assess the impact of bass tournaments was to non-lethally sample blood from fish caught during tournaments at Lake Bloomington and quantify indicators of disturbance. This is similar to the fish "going to the doctor" and allows researchers to assess many different parameters to determine the condition of the fish. Results showed that tournament-caught bass demonstrated the greatest disturbances during late-spring and summer events, but all blood parameters were within normal ranges and bass were able to recover from being caught in a tournament after only a few hours of rest.

Several factors may have contributed to the low impact observed during this study. Evergreen Lake is a small lake (900 acres) and bass probably were not exposed to a lot of bouncing around in livewells compared to situations on larger lakes where waves from wind and boat traffic are much worse.

A strong conservation ethic also might have played a role in keeping fish healthy as anglers ensured that fish were held in optimal water conditions at all points during the tournament.

Also, previous studies have shown that the weighing procedure can be the most challenging part of a tournament for fish, but, in the current tournament circuit, the weighing procedure was quick with bass returning to the lake with a minimum of delay. Overall, a combination of several of these factors may have reduced the impact of this club's tournaments on largemouth bass.

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Typically, the winners of club-style tournaments are determined by the weight of their best five fish that meet the lake's minimum length limit.

(Photo by Matt VanLandeghem.)

(Photo courtesy Strike King Ever-Bloom Tournament Trail.)

(Photo by Cory Suski.)

During the research project, tournament-caught largemouth bass were held in submerged holding pens for three days to assess their health and condition after going through the tournament process.

Continuing to improve fish care guidelines for tournaments will maintain a minimal impact of tournaments on fisheries while retaining the positive economic benefits of tournaments on local communities.

If general fish-care guidelines are followed, such as maintaining adequate water quality and minimizing time out of the water, special tournament procedures probably are not necessary for club-style tournaments.

This study demonstrated that club-style tournaments can have a minimal impact on Illinois fisheries if proper care is taken, ensuring a sustainable future of angling in the Land of Lincoln.

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