The Masters Walleye Circuit celebrates 20 years on the Illinois River and claims fame as the oldest consecutively run professional walleye tournament remaining in the country.

Walleye are Big in Spring Valley

Story and Photos
By Debb Ladgenski

Kristine Houtman, director of the Cabela's MWC, announces winning weight totals at the 2005 Spring Valley Tournament.

Why do nationally known outdoor writers, fishermen and experts declare the Peoria pool of the Illinois River the "Sauger Capital of the World?" A combination of a successfully run walleye fishing tournament and an innovative conservation program have put Spring Valley on the map.

Twenty years ago Bill Guerrini, then president of the Spring Valley Business Owners Association, was looking for a project to promote the community. At the same time, Bob "Kaz" Kaczkowski, executive director of the MWC and an active outdoor writer, learned of the fine Illinois River sauger fishing from the late John Husar of the Chicago Tribune. The two linked up and the rest is history.

In 1984 MWC meant Manufacturers Walleye Council. Kaczkowski didn't like the original name but wanted to keep the MWC logo, so it was agreed to change it to the Masters Walleye Circuit. When Guerrini and the business owners became involved in 1987, the community ran the tournaments, taking care of registration, payments, rules, decisions and media contacts.

In 1990, the Spring Valley Walleye Club was founded by the local fishermen who had run the three previous events and they took over the responsibility of the tournaments. Guerrini remains the Club's executive director.

The North American Membership Group, the world's largest lifestyle affinity club and media corporation, purchased the MWC in 2001 giving the tournament an infusion of media and management.

Kristine Houtman, present director of the Cabela's Masters Walleye Circuit said: "The Spring Valley Walleye Club leaders did such a great job with the tournament that it became the standard other locations strived for. The strength of the

The weather in late March is unpredictable. One year, Saturday dawned with wind chills of 5 degrees, and by 4 p.m. the temperature was 55 degrees. The following day, the temperature was in the 70s, but a blizzard broke out during clean-up. Another year, anglers were met with 70 mph wind gusts and 5-foot waves.

entire club—an active volunteer group—really makes everything run so smoothly."

But what made Spring Valley such a prime location for a walleye fishing tournament? At the same time the Spring Valley MWC was becoming established, efforts to clean up the Illinois River and a restocking research program by Southern Illinois University were taking place.

Pollution and angling exploitation had contributed to the collapse of the sauger and walleye population in the Illinois River.

"Some of the first fish sampled in the 1980s were mutilated, had open sores, scoliosis and signs of water pollution," stated Ed Hansen manager of the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) LaSalle Hatchery.

Bringing anglers and researchers together has created a model, volunteer-led program that has re-established the sauger population to the Illinois River. Tournament-caught fish are kept in roomy, plastic bins and water-filled raceways until final judging. After transport to the LaSalle Hatchery, milt and eggs are stripped from the fish and then fish are returned to the river.

The success of the 20-year history of the Cabela's MWC tournament in Spring Valley can be attributed to former directors, Bill Guerrini (left) and Bob "Kaz" Kaczkowski. Their dedication and hard work has resulted in an unbeaten partnership between the community, anglers and the Department of Natural Resources.

(Photo by Spring Valley Walleye Club.)

"It's a win-win situation," boasted Kaczkowski.

To date, the DNR Illinois River tournament restocking project has produced 61 million fry (1 inch or less) and 5 million fingerlings (2 inches or more).

Restocking efforts have not been limited to the Illinois River. The Des Plaines River and Carlyle and Springfield lakes have profited, and sauger milt has been shipped to Indiana, Oklahoma, Colorado and Pennsylvania, producing millions of saugeye for sport fishing opportunities throughout the nation.

"Colorado also has participated in an exchange program with the state," Hansen went on to say. "They give walleye fry to other Illinois fisheries to continue conservation."

"Both MWC corporate and MWC anglers love working with the local community and fishery officials to make the Illinois Run the best possible fishing it can be," stated Houtman.

Another often overlooked advantage of the Spring Valley MWC tournament was the introduction of the MWC Conservation Fund, now named the Bob and Bev Kaczkowski MWC Conservation Fund in recognition for the years the Kaczkowskis served as executive directors. Monies raised from a portion of every entry fee and direct contributions are returned to each tournament site for programs ranging from fish stocking and fish telemetry to construction or reconstruction of launch sites and dam repairs. And each year, nearly $5,000 in equipment has been donated to the LaSalle hatchery.

MWC and SV Walleye Club monies have been used for river dredging, making improvements to the Barto Landing Launch facilities and keeping its usage free for everyone.

With its March 2006 anniversary, the MWC Spring Valley tournament becomes the oldest consecutively run professional walleye tournament remaining in the country.

"With the entry fees increasing and the field size consistently high, the Spring Valley tournament has one of the highest team format payouts—and a win carries great honor in the industry," Houtman stated.

Has the MWC Spring Valley tournament benefited the community as organizers envisioned? Over the years anglers have spent thousands of dollars in the Illinois Valley area. MWC and walleye club monies have been used to dredge the river, improving the Barto Landing Launch facilities and kept its usage free. These highlights, coupled with the restocking, undoubtedly fulfilled their vision.

Summing it up, Houtman said, "Good fishing, community support and sold-out attendance makes Spring Valley a destination that we want to come back to each year. I feel that the Cabela's Spring Valley MWC tournament is the Daytona 500 of walleye fishing."

Debb Ladgenski is the economic director for the City of Spring Valley.