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Subject: Commercial Lake Whitefish

While looking for some other stuff I recently read through Morton's 1961 report on Saint Mary Lake and discovered some interesting history I had previously overlooked. On pages 31-34 there are "notes and excerpts from correspondence in GNP files dealing with commercial lake whitefish fishery at Lake St. Mary from 1913-1930".

Attached is a summary table I prepared.

The accuracy of these observations cannot be confirmed, but the bottom line is that it appears bull trout were a very infrequent species in Saint Mary Lake, even back in the 1920's. Of the data that is complete (1923 and 1927-1930) the bycatch included 218 lake trout and only 6 bull trout (36:1). Given the amount of effort to catch nearly 50,000 lake whitefish, that would make bull trout pretty rare; at least at that location and time.

With some additional research, I'd bet there are some more nuggets in those archives.

Also of note - if they followed through, it would appear that stocking of lake whitefish in Lake McDonald may be documented and probably occurred in 1927. Additional information might be found in the Bozeman Fish Tech Center archives on that issue. Could lake trout have been in the mix as well? Andy, can you follow up in Bozeman this winter?

(See attached file: St. Mary commercial Lake Whitefish Record.doc)

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St. Mary commercial Lake Whitefish Record.doc

Table 1. Gillnet catches from the commercial whitefish fishery in Saint Mary Lake, GNP. All fish were caught in 2" mesh (presumably sinking) nets, and unless otherwise noted were collected during the summer period (June-September).

YEAR	Lake Whitefish	Lake Trout	Bull Trout	Cutthroat Trout	Rainbow Trout	Total Trout Bycatch
1919	~5,515					
1921	3,276					
1922	7,043	NA	NA	NA	NA	25
1923	10,106	23	4	12	28	67
1925-1926	8,180	NA	NA	NA	NA	42
1926	4,528					
1927	11,856	55	2	8	7	72
1928	5,418	21	0	2	3	26
1929	9,608	74	0	1	17	92
1930	7,105	45	0	8	2	55
TOTAL	72,635	218	6	31	57	379

¹ Number of whitefish was estimated based on reported catch of 6,894 pounds of fish and average weight of 1.25 lbs each.

² Winter netting (Jan. 17-Feb. 2) to capture fish for egg takes; 5.9 million eggs taken, but apparently only 300 of a projected 2,717 females (11%) were ripe in that timeframe. The operation was suspended as being too wasteful. The eggs were shipped to Somers State Hatchery. January 25, 1927 it was reported by Park Superintendent C.J. Kraebel: A The State was very disappointed that the Park Service would not let them take whitefish eggs at St. Mary=s. As I have repeatedly said, I do not believe there will be any objections to trapping operations at St. Mary=s next winter, but to take spawn from so small a lake two years in succession is too severe a drain on the fish population of that lake.@ Subsequently, in correspondence dated January 27, 1927 to C.J. Kraebel from W.T. Thompson (Bozeman Hatchery) it was noted Thompson had arranged for 1.0 million Lake Superior whitefish eggs for Lake McDonald and 1.0 million for the Somers Hatchery for Flathead Lake from the Great Lakes.