

WHAT IS WRONG WITH MY BASS?

Many pond owners feel that fishing in their favorite private pond has gone downhill. They are not catching quality bass anymore. Instead, they catch bass that are mostly small, only 10 to 14 inches long. What has happened? According to Dr. Michael Masser, a Fisheries Specialist with Texas Cooperative Extension, these ponds have “stunted” or “crowded” bass populations. Masser says that this is a common problem in ponds throughout Texas and the Southeast.

The problem is an over-population problem. For whatever reason, the adult bass in the pond have successfully spawned but too many of the offspring have survived. Bass spawn every year but due to natural predation only a few normally survive: this is nature’s way of population control. In bass crowded ponds, at some time in the past, the bass spawn was greater than normal and/or more of the young bass survived. Then as they started growing, eating everything in sight that they could get in their “large mouths” and swallow it whole, they had more competition with each other than normal. Basically, they all had the same size mouth. This limited the food they could find and swallow and therefore limited their growth.

All those surviving bass siblings became the proverbial “too many mouths at the table”. There is only so much food available for the bass population in any pond, and what each bass can eat is dependent on the size of its mouth. So, in this case with too many small bass, there is not enough food of the size they needed to continue to grow. They survive but do not grow. Unlike birds and mammals (“warm-blooded”) which must heat their bodies and therefore have to have an almost continuous food source just to stay alive, fish are “cold-blooded” meaning that they do not have to have a continuous source of food to survive. As long as fish gets a meal every few months, they will survive, but won’t necessarily grow.

So this is the problem. The small bass may be small because there is not enough food available for them to grow. And there is not enough food for growth because there are too many of the same-size fish, all eating the same size prey. After being stunted for several years, even if they had more food available, they will not grow to a large size because they are too old.

Most anglers who catch small bass release them back into the pond thinking “I’ll put them back and let them grow”. But, if there is too many of them then they cannot grow. So, while “catch-and-release” is a good management policy in public waters, it often leads to stunted-bass populations in private ponds.

One way to decide if the bass are truly stunted is to look at their condition. A bass in good condition will be plump or have a rounded body-shape while stunted fish will be skinny with a large head and eyes, and even a tail that looks too large for the body. If you can poke them in the belly and hit their backbone they are skinny. Bass do not suffer from anorexia and they do not go on diets! If a bass looks skinny, he probably doesn’t have enough to eat!

The management answer should be obvious - remove some bass! The question is how many and what size? According to Masser, your bass removal efforts need to be targeted at bass that are of a similar size and look skinny. If, when you are fishing, you catch a large number of bass all about the same size, usually 10 to 14 inches, and they look skinny, then those are the ones that need to be harvested. When you catch a larger fish, say 18 inches or larger then that is a fish that could be released to continue to grow. But before you let it go, look at its condition. If it also looks skinny with a large head then it is stunted too. As a general rule-of-thumb, in unfertilized ponds about 10 pounds of bass per surface acre of pond need to be harvested each year. In a well fertilized pond, harvest 25 to 30 pounds of bass per surface acre per year.

So if you want to improve bass fishing in your private pond, harvest selectively. After all “man” is the key component of proper management.