

# here for the fishing



□ by Stuart Osthoff

**E**ditor's Note: Quetico Park has been preparing to impose new regulations banning the use of all live bait and barbed hooks. This article examines the rationale behind the new policy and some angling strategies to best deal with it. The bait/barb ban was expected to begin with the 2007 season; however, as this BWJ went to press in early March, final approval at the federal level was still pending. The bait/barb ban may not take effect until 2008. BWJ will have an update in the June issue. In the meantime, call Quetico Park for the latest info, 1-807-597-2735. Whether this year or next, the bait/barb ban appears inevitable for Quetico so BWJ writers will be fishing manufactured organic baits and barbless hooks this summer. Our goal is to help BWJ readers switch to more environmentally friendly tackle while still capturing the special thrill of Quetico wilderness sportfishing.

The scenario is becoming all too familiar for those who love to fish and hunt. Yet—another regulation comes down from “the powers that be” declaring we must change our ways in the woods. **We** seem like the endangered species. Change may be inevitable, but history begs the question: is it always for the better?

Anglers have a vested interest in maintaining healthy fisheries. If fishermen were not devoted conservationists, our fisheries would be in a whole lot worse shape. But where do we draw the line on restricting our freedom to pursue the priceless joy of wilderness

## Quetico Going Baitless/Barbless?

sportfishing? Just exactly how do we balance resource protection with resource enjoyment?

For this article I consulted with Quetico Park Superintendent Robin Reilly because he is in the best position to explain the rationale behind the new policy to completely ban all live/real bait and barbed hooks. By contrasting Reilly's perspective with mine and other BWJ readers, hopefully, we can get this new era in Quetico angling off to a good start.

Will the ban deliver an ecological upside that justifies the recreational downside? Ultimately, only time will tell. In the meantime Quetico anglers have four options: stay home, go elsewhere, disregard the law, or roll with it. If you truly love Quetico fishing like I do, the bottom line is you'll do what ethical sportsmen always do. Change your ways for the good of Quetico **and** all who share a deep passion for fishing it.

### Quetico Park—General Management Philosophy

While the BWCAW and Quetico are closely linked in history, geography and management, they are indeed two different systems. The BWCAW is a designated wilderness area within the Superior National Forest. It is **not a park**. It is managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Fishing (and hunting/trapping) within the BWCAW are largely the responsibility of the State of Minnesota. Consequently, fisheries management within the BWCAW closely parallels that found on waters

outside the wilderness. Live minnows, leeches and nightcrawlers are allowed in the BWCAW. I'm aware of no serious efforts to ban live bait/barbed hooks for the BWCAW. (Live minnows are not allowed in designated stream trout lakes within the BWCAW.)

Quetico, on the other hand, is an Ontario Provincial Park—a wilderness **park**. The goal here is to make Quetico as healthy, natural, pristine and ecologically diverse as possible within the confines of what has naturally occurred there. The primary fisheries goal is strong, big, beautiful fish as part of a natural ecosystem. Sustainable fishing as recreation, heightened appreciation of nature or increased park revenues are secondary.

### The Downside of Minnows, Leeches & Crawlers

Unlike the BWCAW, where live minnows are generally allowed, Quetico has had a live minnow ban since 1977. Most anglers can understand the risks of introducing new non-native species to wilderness waters through minnow buckets. As a practical matter, live minnows are rarely carried much beyond the first few portages into the BWCAW. My own observations show most BWCAW minnows are fished by those in the motorized zones. It's just a difficult chore to keep minnows alive long enough for extended backcountry trips.

Some BWCAW anglers bring in minnow traps/nets to harvest minnows for use on a



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given backcountry lake. Since these minnows are already living/reproducing in this particular lake, what is the harm in fishing them here? Reilly says this practice is not allowed in Quetico because it would cause serious enforcement problems. There would be no way for officers to know whether an angler trapped minnows on a lake or illegally imported/transported them in.

Another common practice by anglers in both Quetico and the BWCAW, especially winter lake trout enthusiasts, has been the use of frozen/dead/salted ciscoes, smelt, suckers, minnows, etc. All forms of dead or preserved real bait fish will be banned in Quetico under the new rules. Reilly includes dead baitfish in the ban because introducing foreign viruses/bacteria to the water system with frozen/salted bait poses risks as serious as spreading new baitfish species around. The latest scary example is viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) linked to die-offs of several freshwater fish species. VHS could have serious ecological and economical impacts. Officials are so concerned they have largely shut down harvest/transportation of live baitfish from southern Ontario to northern Ontario.

In 2000 anglers were told they could not bring leeches into Canada from the U.S.A. (In 2005 Ontario bait dealers stopped importing U.S.A. leeches.) Many U.S. anglers assumed this was an economic move, compelling them to purchase leeches in Canada, which they adjusted to doing. Then the fear of introducing non-native species of leeches was given as the reason behind the ban. Of late, anglers bound for Quetico through Prairie Portage/Cache Bay could not fish with leeches. Anglers entering through Lac La Croix, Beaverhouse and Atikokan entry points could purchase leeches from Canadian bait shops then portage/fish them in Quetico. The new law will mean **nobody** fishes leeches in Quetico. Period.

Since at least some species of leeches are indigenous to Quetico lakes, they would seem to fall within the ecological parameters. But Reilly says it's the water the leeches are transported in from lakes outside the park that poses a risk of unwanted introductions of bacteria, parasites or other organisms. It is this unintentional baggage, which fishermen don't even realize they are spreading around, that worries Reilly.

Reilly sites the examples of smelt in Pickerel Lake and crappies in Quetico Lake. It's reasonable to assume these exotics reached new homes with angler assistance. Spiny water fleas were recently discovered entering Quetico through Saganaga Lake. The range of this pest is known to be increasing, often unknowingly carried from lake to lake by fishermen. Smaller fish will not eat these fleas with spiny tails. The concern is



they could out-compete the native phytoplankton. Less daphnia and more spiny water fleas means less small fish leading to fewer large fish.

Reilly admits not enough is known about possible ecological consequences of spiny water fleas in Quetico. Could other undesirable exotics be knocking on the door? Probably. (There are now 183 documented exotics in the Great Lakes.) Whatever the degree of difficulty of total prevention of these invasives, Reilly believes a proactive approach to minimizing their spread is needed. The Park is his responsibility. So he is acting.

Nightcrawlers have been a mainstay bait of canoe country anglers for over 100 years. They are inexpensive, easy and effective to use and relatively hearty to transport. Crawlers are especially popular with walleye anglers. Minnesota ranks #1 among annual Quetico visitors, and walleye is king with Minnesota anglers. One would think if crawlers were doing serious damage, it would be apparent by now. I was surprised to learn most North American worms are not native, including nightcrawlers. Most are exotics brought here in the ballast of ships and in animal feed/manure. Worms are currently found along the edges of Quetico, but there are few to none in the Park's interior.

The problem with worms isn't so much those we fish with. It's the leftovers we discard at landings, campsites and portages. In theory, if the crawlers we impale on a hook are killed or eaten by fish and we don't release any leftovers, they shouldn't spread into Quetico soils. But we **have** been dumping them out and when we do, they breakdown organic matter/leaf litter much faster than native processes (fungi; mosses, etc.). This rapid decay creates a much shallower leaf layer with impacts on the plants, insects and mammals that live in that duff layer. Less leaf litter leads to drier soils allowing tree species whose seeds normally do not penetrate this duff layer to suddenly find a new niche. Trees bearing seeds evolved to penetrate the duff, no longer have a competitive advantage. Studies have found worms affecting forest composition out east and in Minnesota.

Anyone who has paddled through the Canadian Shield country of Quetico has seen the abundance of rock and scarcity of soil. It's a stretch to envision widespread nightcrawler migration/infestation here. I guide elk hunters in northeastern Colorado, where chronic wasting disease (CWD) was first documented. To limit possible spread of CWD to elk/deer in other states, our hunters are required to leave the skulls/brains/spinal columns of all elk in Colorado. I asked Reilly why a similar approach couldn't be used with nightcrawlers in Quetico;

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require the safe disposal of all leftover worms where they can't escape into the wilderness ecosystem. His response was that while it is possible to change the worm disposal behavior of some individuals, it is not realistic to expect everyone to pack out all unused, perhaps cooked and rotten, nightcrawlers from the Quetico. It only takes a few survivors to infest a hardwood stand.

### **A Pre-cautionary Principle Guides Quetico**

One could argue every single human use/impact in Quetico has the potential for "unnatural" negative consequences. Taken to the logical extreme, we could put a fence around our precious wilderness areas to absolutely minimize human influence. Those advocating this approach usually mean keep everybody out, except themselves. But even this couldn't prevent air-borne contaminants or human induced weather impacts. Is a perfectly "natural" wilderness ecosystem worth total elimination of all human use/enjoyment of that wilderness? If nobody can experience our wilderness, who will appreciate and care enough to preserve it?

The reality is, people have been "using" Quetico for thousands of years, and at least by 21st Century standards, it still achieves pristine wilderness status. Clearly some human use is compatible with sustaining a wilderness ecosystem. Determining these allowable levels/types of use is the never ending challenge for Quetico Park officials.

Reilly emphasizes Quetico issues 6,000+ overnight interior camping permits each year; a higher use level than many wilderness parks. He is aware/concerned about fewer young people getting involved in fishing, but his first priority is protecting the Quetico ecosys-

tem. Quetico tries to adopt fisheries policies that lead to less unintended damage to fish, as well as less risk of biological or chemical contamination. They err on the side of fish health as opposed to fisherman satisfaction.

Even if it becomes possible to document a decline in walleye catch rates from the nightcrawler/barb ban, perhaps an upside could result as well. If walleyes prove more difficult to catch with only artificials, it's reasonable to assume Quetico waters with relatively high harvest levels will see increases in average walleye size and numbers of larger fish. Savvy anglers adopting the right new tactics might actually find enhanced trophy walleye opportunities. Clearly, a complex interaction of many unknown variables is set in motion by these new regulations.

Reilly acknowledges there is not irrefutable proof minnows, leeches and crawlers are damaging the Quetico ecosystem. He has consulted the leading studies/authorities in this decision-making process. And he has decided to act on the side of caution. He suggests each of us ask ourselves—is carrying leech water, containing who knows what, into Quetico worth the risk? A fear of the unknown is part of the equation.

Perhaps the best way to understand Reilly's thinking is this statement. "I do what I think is in the best long-term interest of Quetico's environment **first** and in the long-term interest of our users as a secondary important goal." Reilly hopes his precautionary approach will set an example for other areas to follow.

### **The Barbed Hook Ban**

The *Boundary Waters Journal* has relentlessly promoted, practiced and preached catch and release fishing in canoe country over the past 20 years.

These relatively infertile waters can sustain an occasional fish fry of smaller fish; we advocate one or two meals per group on a one-week canoe trip. A main course of fish at every opportunity is not sustainable. The wonderful thing about sportfishing is we can choose to release any or all fish, minimizing our impact on the fishery while still capturing great thrills, photos and memories. We can catch lots of fish and eat a few too.

Judging from the feedback of *BWJ* readers, catch and release has become the norm rather than the exception in Quetico. Quetico anglers should be very proud of this ethic, a shining example of fishermen changing their ways for the better. It says, I may never catch this fish again, but releasing it for others to enjoy is worth far more to me than eating it.

Good intentions to release all those larger, mature fish is one thing. Executing the netting, handling, unhooking and revival with maximum effectiveness is another. Reilly feels many Quetico anglers struggle with these "minimum impact release skills" and barbed hooks are a major reason why.

Reilly is aware most studies show little significant difference in mortality rates between fish caught/released with barbed vs. barbless hooks, but he believes in actual practice a worthwhile benefit for going barbless can still be found. That is because over one third of all Quetico visitors are youth groups of novice anglers who dabble in casual attempts to catch a fish dinner. My own observations are they don't know how to play a fish, don't keep them in the water/net enough (most don't even bring a net), and they carry no forceps/pliers to quickly unhook the fish with minimum stress. In short, they don't have the knowledge, skills or gear to quickly release fish without



stress. Getting rid of the barb, Reilly concludes, will shorten the time the fish is out of the water/handled/stressed.

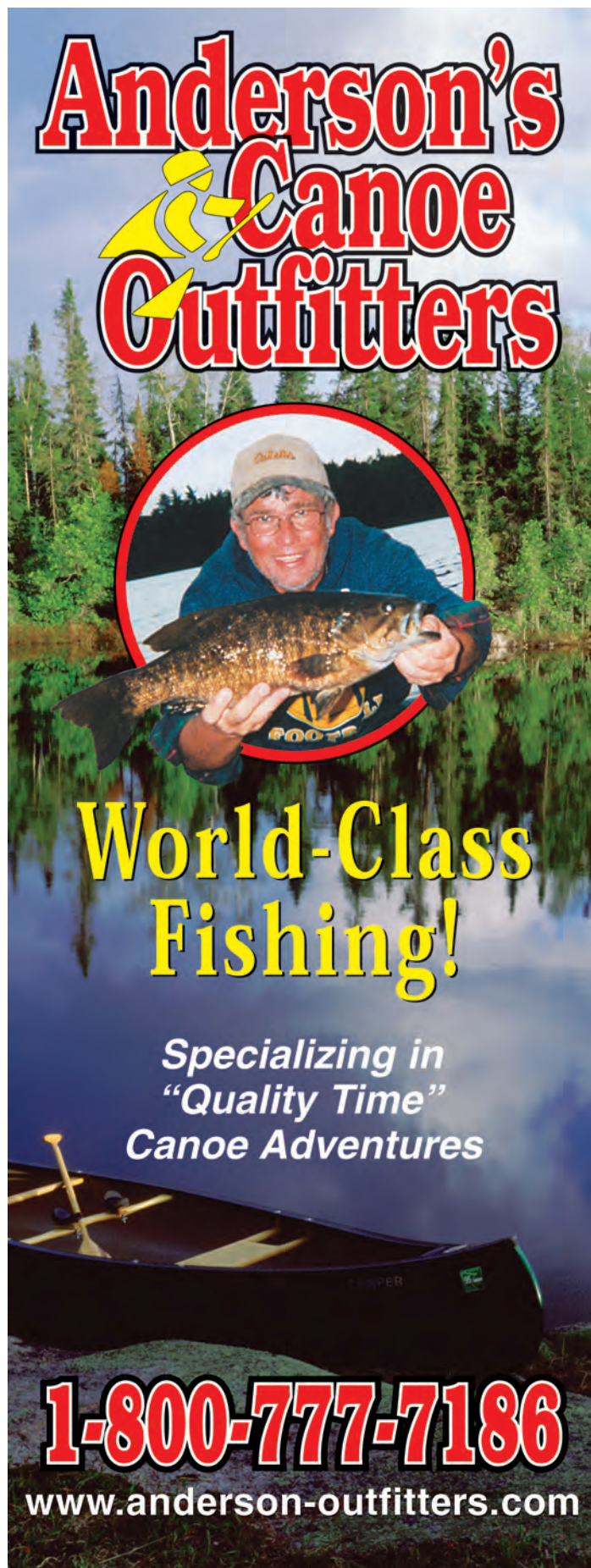
My own guess is these novice/casual anglers catch few fish anyway and without bait/barbed hooks will be catching even less. The number of fish they release which owe their survival to barbless hooks will be very small in my view.

Reilly gets satellite phone calls from groups with some kid impaled by a hook on a remote interior lake requesting an aircraft evacuation. Of course, this brings disruption to other nearby campers. Barbless hooks will be easier to back-out of humans, making such evacuations less necessary. This is a secondary benefit to banning barbed hooks.

From 1975-1995 my clients and I caught thousands of fish in Quetico, mostly smallmouth and pike with walleyes to a lesser degree. All were on artificial lures/flyies (no live bait) and all on barbed hooks (many with double sets of barbed trebles). We released over 99% of those fish, and I recall less than a dozen not making it. Perhaps some stress mortality does go unseen, but those going belly-up are usually easy to spot and make a quick meal for gulls, eagles or other predators. The point is, bass and pike are very tough customers. Even walleyes can withstand an occasional drop/subsequent thrashing around in the bottom of the canoe. **Handled properly with a net/forceps**—bass, pike and walleyes on artificial lures with **barbed** hooks **can** be released with very low mortality. I believe this because I've seen it happen. Over and over and over for 30 years.

From 1995 to 2006, as my own kids learned how to fish on Quetico trips, my focus changed from casting artificials to targeting walleyes with live bait. Three or four bodies all throwing nasty treble hook crankbaits out of a single canoe doesn't work. Rigging the kids with a leech or crawler on a plain single hook keeps them in the "strike zone" whether paddling/trolling, drifting or anchored. The kids just flip the bait overboard, peel out some line and they're in business with a minimum of tangling.

Walleyes typically slash leeches and minnows broadside, usually hooking themselves in the mouth where a quick turn of the forceps can easily set it free. Nightcrawlers are a different story. Walleyes often swallow them deep down into the throat. It takes some dexterity to extract hooks down deep. Sometimes it is hopeless without drawing blood—which usually means the fish is a goner. Some experts recommend cutting off/leaving such hooks. I definitely believe barbless hooks could lower mortality of worm-caught/released walleyes. Since Quetico is banning both the worms and barbed hooks the point becomes academic. It will be interesting to



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see if walleyes swallow the new manufactured organic worms like they do real crawlers, and if barbless will help survival rates here.

I expect lake trout to be the big winner of the Quetico bait/barb ban. As far as I'm concerned, outlawing the ciscoe/treble/double hook methods which virtually assures a dead fish when typically swallowed, is good riddance. Winter anglers are especially deadly on lake trout with this presentation. Any angling technique that renders a low-stress release option nearly impossible, is a practice whose end is overdue. This is contrary to everything modern sportfishing is all about. I look for Quetico lake trout fisheries to really improve with the reduced participation/effectiveness the bait/barb ban will have on ice anglers.

Lake trout seem to be more sensitive to angler stress than

bass, pike or even walleye. That's why I personally target them **only** in the early season in May/June when the water is very cold, the fish are fairly shallow (air bladders are not full when caught) and artificial lures on light tackle can be effective. It will be interesting to see if we can land those big, powerful trout without barbs on our trolling spoons.

### The Upshot For Quetico Anglers

So what does this all mean as we contemplate permit reservations, routes and trip plans for 2007? Here is my take on the likely changes and some strategies to handle them.

If you come to Quetico to paddle, camp and enjoy the country, what's not to like? You're going to encounter less fishing parties. That means more vacant campsites and more solitude. Especially on medium-sized lakes off the beaten path. Anglers tend to

hone in on the same hotspot locations every year on the best fishing lakes. Non-anglers are more flexible/mobile in their travels. They don't choose a destination lake like anglers. Anglers tend to base out of one camp longer. I look for more rapid turnover of campsites on the productive fishing lakes.

For those investing the precious time, money and energy to travel to Quetico primarily because of the fishing, the ban gives one pause to ask: can I still be effective fishing here? What's my best bet now? Specifically, what species will I enjoy pursuing the most under the bait/barb ban and how, when and where can I best go about it?

While I personally do not see any looming ecological imperative for banning leeches/crawlers and barbed hooks in Quetico, I honestly believe the new regulations will prove relatively painless for small-



*Crankbait fans can easily comply with the new Quetico barbless hook regulation. The new BWJ drop point barbless trebles have tested out well and easily attach with split rings. (See BWJ Barbless Trebles ad page 20.)*

mouth and pike anglers. Spinning rod fans who replace the barbed trebles on all their crank baits with the new drop point BWJ barbless trebles (see ad page 20) should see comparable hooking/catch rates. (Most bass and pike angling is done without live bait already. These aggressive predators are readily taken on artificials.) These specially designed super sharp BWJ barbless trebles have tested out very well. They promise to be an effective substitute for barbed trebles. And should some slimy pike thrash one into your hand, barbless will pop out much easier.

Fly fishermen chasing small-mouth could find it more challenging to stick/hold fish without barbs. Diligence on hook sharpness and flies with larger hooks should help.

All the crank baits you al-

ready own/use for bass, pike and walleye that have split rings will be fairly easy to swap out for the new BWJ barbless trebles. My favorite small-mouth topwater lure, the Rapala Skitter Pop, has split rings. But the Heddon Baby Torpedo, another great bass/pike surface lure, affixes the trebles to the body with screw eyes. When you take these out, they don't want to go back in and hold. So I cut the barbed trebles off with a good wire cutters, put a split ring on the screw eye and the BWJ barbless treble on the split ring.

Most Dardevle spoon-type lures also have split rings so a quick switch is easy. In line spinners like the Mepps, which integrate a bucktail into the treble, are more problematic. You can cut them off, install a split ring and the BWJ barbless trebles but you lose the

bucktail dressing. The only other option is to pinch/crimp or file down the barbs. Reilly notes this will satisfy the Quetico rule for now. But that debilitates the lure for other areas, and I'm convinced hook-up rates will plummet with mashed barbs. Whenever my kids start losing inordinate numbers of fish, invariably it is because the hooks/barbs have gone dull on the rocks. Replacing all your trebles with BWJ barbless trebles is the best way to go with crank baits, spoons and spinners.

Bass anglers who are fans of going subsurface with tubes, grubs and other scented plastics face a more uncertain future. That is because I don't see a single-hook barbless design that can be substituted as effectively as the new BWJ barbless trebles. Reilly is not a big fan of plastic baits; he



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considers them like litter that will languish for years on snags or even in fish. Again, you can mash your hooks/jigs to make them barbless but don't expect good results. *BWJ* will be intensively testing and covering new baits/barbless hooks for all Quetico fishing opportunities in upcoming issues. Like Reilly, we believe tackle will eventually improve when a new market/demand is created.

A final note on Quetico smallmouth. If you're grumbling about the bait/barb ban, you may want to stop and

count your blessings. In a perfect world Reilly notes, smallmouth would never have come to the Quetico. Reilly would rather see anglers favor the non-native smallmouth for fish fries over walleyes. I've long recommended to *BWJ* readers they eat only smaller walleyes; I never eat smallmouth or pike and almost never lake trout.

I've guided lots of anglers who have fished the world's most hallowed waters and many rate Quetico's smallmouth a world class wilderness

sportfishing experience. Quetico's policy is to encourage anglers to kill/eat the non-indigenous smallmouth over native species. To me and legions of other anglers, walleyes are a meat fish. Always have been. Always will be. Smallmouth are a game fish. I didn't create this. It's just the way it is. I know going in on smallmouth trips there will be no fish fries. I'm fine with this. On the other hand, some lakes can surely sustain some harvest, and the killing/eating of some 12-15" bass would prob-



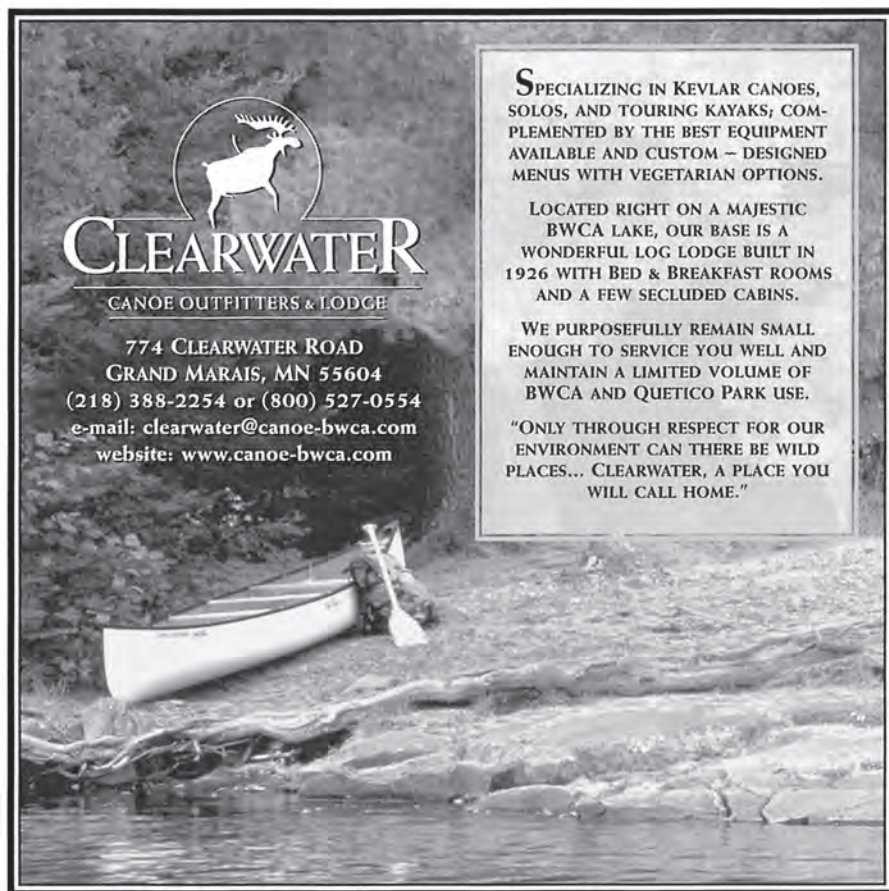
ably benefit the overall bass population.

A big part of Reilly's reasoning for pulling the trigger on the bait/barb ban now is his faith in the new manufactured organic baits like GULP and Food Source Products. According to Berkley, who makes and sells GULP, "GULP is a biodegradable, non-invasive, non-plastic material. GULP has 400 times more scent dispersion than other scented baits, even out-fishing live bait." I'm gearing up to give GULP, et. al. a very thorough trial this summer, but I'll believe it when I see it. If GULP out-fishes the real thing, why do hard-core anglers on our premiere walleye waters continue to hassle with the expense of fishing real bait?

I expect walleye fans to struggle the most with the bait/barb ban. Traditional walleye tactics call for slow presentations: back-trolling, drifting, anchoring and slip bobbers. Walleye are a finicky, stubborn species. Live bait seems the preferred choice under most conditions.

I've personally taken my only two 30" Quetico walleyes on artificials, a blue countdown #9 Rapala and a 3" Plastic Power Leech on a yellow floating jighead. And I've caught lots of lesser walleyes on Shad Raps, jigs with plastic twister tails, even Mepps with rubber minnows. It can be done. But I'm still skeptical GULP can step up and produce like real leeches and nightcrawlers. I hope it can. It would be sweet to hover over a walleye honey hole and enjoy that awesome Quetico action without the hassles and environmental drawbacks of real bait.

I suspect some dedicated walleye canoe anglers will shift to the BWCAW, Woodland Caribou Park or Wabakami Park. The logistics, bureaucracy and costs of fishing Quetico combined with the



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new restrictions seem very onerous to some. Reilly sees such attrition as necessary for ecosystem protection. He likens it to the visitors who never returned when Quetico banned motorized travel or groups of more than nine people.

The thing that bothers me most about the bait/barb ban is what it could mean to the next generation of Quetico anglers. I've watched my kids and so many others learn the skills and thrills of fishing Quetico... on walleyes with live bait. In canoe country the most effective way to get youngsters hooked on fishing, and subsequently the outdoors and wilderness appreciation/preservation, is dropping a leech or crawler onto a walleye reef. It's not the only way. I hope and pray that my grandchildren and yours can fish Quetico with environmentally friendly tackle and still experience the same sense of spiritual

fulfillment I've come to treasure from this special place.

Reilly counters with, if we allow exotics to compromise the wilderness ecosystem/fishery, what kind of angling legacy is that for future generations?

Let's all give the artificial only/barbless fishing era in Quetico a fair shake. *BWJ* promises to do everything we can to help you all speed up the learning curve. So watch for upcoming coverage of new tackle and techniques and be willing to share your own experiences with fellow *BWJ* readers.

*Editor's note: For the record, for those who may be wondering/tempted, the penalty for using "real bait" and barbed hooks in Quetico is anticipated to be about a \$200 (Canadian) fine. Besides that, there is a clean conscience; real sportsmen don't cheat. Period. □*