

Friends Of Istokpoga

NewsWire

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Mercury Level in Lake Istokpoga

*by Beacham Furse and Ted Lange, Division of
Freshwater Fisheries, FFWCC*

In response to concerns by individuals that the 2001 Aquatic Habitat Enhancement Drawdown, as well as other habitat enhancement activities conducted by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, may increase mercury levels in fish in Lake Istokpoga, Division of Freshwater Fisheries biologists collected largemouth bass from Istokpoga in January 2002 to determine mercury content. Results of this study have shown that **mercury levels in Istokpoga largemouth bass have decreased since samples were last collected in 1989.** Bass collected in 1989 had an average mercury level of 0.60 parts per million (ppm). Average mercury level for bass in 2002 was 0.44 ppm with bass less than 15 inches (bass harvestable under the 15" - 24" protective slot limit) having an average concentration of 0.39 ppm. The most likely explanation for this decrease is that, in general, mercury emissions to the atmosphere have decreased over the last decade and therefore mercury loading to our lakes has reduced. Also, as Lake Istokpoga has become more eutrophic, less mercury is expected to reach largemouth bass at the top of the food chain. That being said, because bass greater than 14 inches are used as the standard for determining consumption advisories and the average mercury level for Istokpoga bass over 14 inches is 0.51 ppm (A 0.50 ppm level triggers a consumption advisory), **the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission continues to recommend limited consumption of largemouth bass from Lake Istokpoga** (see definition of "Limited Consumption"

in the following Q/A section). Below are some frequently asked questions concerning mercury.

What is mercury?

Mercury belongs to a group of elements collectively known as "heavy metals". It exists in many forms such as elemental mercury (the mercury found in scientific thermometers), inorganic mercury (used in manufacturing), and organic mercury (form usually found in contaminated foods). In high enough doses, all three forms present serious threats to human health.

Where does mercury come from?

Although mercury is naturally found in rock, soil, air, water and plant and animal tissue, it was formerly used by industry in many different applications. It was used in the manufacturing of chlorine and lye. It was also used in pulp and paper mills to control slime growth and by agriculture to prevent fungus growth on seeds. Presently, the most common man-made source of mercury in Florida is from the burning of coal, medical waste, and household trash containing mercury cell batteries. Inorganic forms of mercury are transported over great distances in the atmosphere and deposited onto the earth's surface through dry fall and rain.

How does mercury get into fish?

Once mercury enters the aquatic environment, it can be transformed through the actions of bacteria to its most toxic form, methyl-mercury. This process, called methylation, occurs predominantly in sediments and algae. Methyl-mercury is absorbed by small plants, crustaceans, and insects and is transferred up through

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the food chain as these prey items are consumed by larger predators in a process called bioaccumulation. Fish obtain virtually all methyl-mercury through their diet. Once a fish takes in methyl-mercury, much of it is deposited in its muscle tissue. Because fish eliminate mercury from their bodies very slowly, mercury can gradually accumulate in high concentrations. Generally, the larger and older the fish or animal gets, the greater the concentration of mercury in their body.

What are the health effects of mercury?

By eating fish with high levels of mercury, you are absorbing that mercury into your body. All animals will eventually eliminate mercury from their bodies naturally, but only at a slow rate. If you take in more mercury than your body can get rid of, mercury will accumulate in your body. No danger of mercury poisoning exists when fish are not eaten from affected areas. Therefore, fish caught and released do not present any danger from mercury poisoning.

Toxic effects of mercury differ from person to person and are primarily based on the amount of mercury consumed. Although mercury levels in Florida fish are not high enough to cause acute illness, frequent consumption of fish containing low levels of mercury may result in serious health risks. Hand tremors, speech impediments, and lack of coordination are some nerve and brain symptoms of mercury poisoning. Sensory disturbances include tunnel vision, blindness, and deafness. Birth defects such as deafness, blindness, and cerebral palsy may result from fetal exposure to mercury. Unborn and very young children are most vulnerable to mercury due to the sensitivity of their developing nervous systems.

What mercury levels are of concern?

When fish are found to have mercury concentrations greater than 0.5 parts per million (ppm), the Florida Department of Health issues a health advisory. **Water bodies in which mercury levels are between 0.5 and 1.5 ppm receive a "Limited Consumption" advisory.** If fish have concentrations exceeding 1.5 ppm, the Florida Department of Health recommends that fish from those systems should not be consumed under any circumstances ("No Consumption" advisory). **Lake Istokpoga, as well as all other lakes in Highlands County, are considered "Limited Consumption" lakes.**

What does "Limited Consumption" mean?

Certain fish species (largemouth bass, gar, and bowfin) caught in water bodies with "Limited Consumption" advisories should not be eaten more than once per week by adults and not more than once per month by pregnant women, nursing mothers, women who intend to have children, and children under 15 years old.

This recommendation is based on a portion size of 8 ounces of fish per person.

Can anything be done to make these fish safe to eat?

No special cooking or cleaning methods exist to reduce mercury levels in fish. Because mercury is not stored in fatty tissue, mercury cannot be removed by discarding fish fat.

Where can I get more information about mercury?

You may contact your County Public Health Department or the Florida Department of Health Bureau of Environmental Epidemiology ([850] 488-3385). You may also contact Beacham Furse ([863] 462-5190) or Ted Lange (Chemistry Section; [352] 742-6438) with the Florida Fish and Wildlife

While the mercury level in **Lake Istokpoga** for 2002 is lower than it was in 1989, it still falls within the range where **FFWCC** recommends limited consumption of the bass.

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Conservation Commission. Web sites with good information include <http://floridafisheries.com/health.html>, <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/labs/mercury/index.html>, and <http://www.epa.gov/mercury/index.html>.

Windy Point Park Update

by Bill Dwinell

The park at Windy Point is moving closer to becoming a reality. According to Tom Champeau, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC), all agreement, subleases, etc. are signed and executed.

The FFWCC plan is to restore as much of the natural habitat as possible. They are meeting with scrub experts at Archbold Biological Station to get their input. Once they restore the land not being developed as parking, they want to put a boardwalk through the park. They are also looking into developing the pond that is currently on the property. They want to showcase the lake, wetlands, build a scrub restoration demonstration project, and reforest about eight acres along Highlands Lake Drive.

The property at the corner of Highlands Lake Drive and Boat Ramp Road is owned by the FFWCC and is being leased to Highlands County. Under this agreement the county will maintain the property and develop it into a park.

We met recently with Vicki Pontius, Director of Parks and Recreation for Highlands County, and representatives from the FFWCC, as well as private individuals who own property in the area where the park is planned. The meeting was to discuss the proposed plans for the park and issues with those plans. Vicki explained where the county was on funding of the park. The first phase grant request, in the amount of \$200,000 has already been submitted. Once the grant money was received a second grant would be requested to fund phase two of the park. Vicki stated that the actual construction would probably not begin until both grants were received. This will likely be a year or two from now.

Phase one included a parking area for cars and boat trailers, a retention pond, and fencing around the park. Phase two included rest rooms, a playground, a picnic pavilion and the boardwalk.

The home owners voiced several concerns with the plan as it was explained. These concerns were mainly about traffic, security, and adequate rest room

facilities. Several suggestions were given to Vicki which appeared to resolve most of the concerns voiced.

The suggested changes outlined at the meeting, would reduce traffic backups on Boat Ramp Road, eliminate traffic on Windy Point Road, have rest rooms installed before opening the park (note: the initial rest room facilities may have to be porta-pots), fix a problem with the location of the retention pond, and reduce the initial number of parking spaces. Reducing the initial number of spaces would allow the county to add more spaces if they are needed in the future. While no commitment was made by Vicki, the suggestions appeared to be well received.

Royce Unit of the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area- *Formerly known as the Silver Harbor Ranch*

Things are progressing at the newest environmental area around Lake Istokpoga. According to Kevin Main, the biologist managing the Royce Unit of the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife Area, the area is now open to visitors. People can walk or bike the roads. Horses are allowed with a permit (people need to contact Kevin Main for a permit). Eventually we hope to have some marked trails (will require the help of some volunteers). The entrance road ("Royce Road") will soon be open all the time and the trail head will be off this road, about 1/4 mile west of Virginia Avenue.

Walking/Riding trails are planned, and if volunteers can be found to help with the trails, they will be completed much sooner. Kevin said *"If we can get a group of dedicated volunteers willing to work on trails now, I'd be willing to get started on designing a trail system, marking it and starting maintenance of it. Otherwise, it will probably be this winter before we can do much."*

If you are interested in helping, contact Kevin Main at 863-699-3740.

Here are the approved rules for the site:

OPEN SEASON

1) **Dove Hunts** -- The first, second, and fourth Saturdays only during the first phase; the first and third Saturdays only during the second phase; and the first, third, and fifth Saturdays only during the third

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phase of the mourning and white-winged dove season established by Rule 68A-13.008, F.A.C.

2) **Small Game Hunts** -- December 6-8, December 20-22, January 3-5, and January 17-19.

LEGAL TO TAKE

- 1) **Dove Hunts** -- Mourning dove and white-winged dove only.
- 2) **Small Game Hunts** -- Small game and wild hogs. There shall be no size or bag limit for wild hogs.

PERMITS

Dove Hunts -- A maximum of 25 dove hunt permits shall be issued for each dove hunt. Dove hunt permits for all dove hunts can be reserved on a first-come, first-served basis at the Royce dove field from 8:00 a.m. until noon on Saturday, September 14th. Individuals must be present to reserve a permit.

Individuals shall reserve no more than one permit for a dove hunt. Individuals may reserve a dove hunt permit for no more than two dove hunts. Permits that aren't reserved may be obtained on a first-come, first-served basis at the Royce check station beginning at 11:00 a.m. on the day of the hunt. Individuals in possession of a permit reservation shall check-in at the check station between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. on the day of their scheduled hunt to obtain their dove hunt permit. Individuals who possess a permit reservation and fail to check-in at the check station between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. on the day of their scheduled hunt will have their reservation voided. Beginning at 3:00 p.m. on the day of each hunt, permits will be issued on a first-come, first-served basis as needed to allow for up to 25 dove hunt permittees. Dove hunt permits and permit reservations are transferable.

Small Game Hunts -- A maximum of 20 daily hunt permits shall be issued each day during the small

game hunts. Permits shall be issued at the Royce check station on the day of the hunt.

SPECIFIC AREA REGULATIONS

- 1) Persons shall possess a dove hunt permit to hunt in posted dove fields.
- 2) During the dove hunts, one minor under 16 years of age may accompany an adult permittee and may hunt under the supervision and in the presence of the permittee.
- 3) Dove hunters may enter the area at 11:00 a.m. and shall exit the area by one hour after sunset. During the small game hunts, hunters may enter the area no earlier than one hour before sunrise and shall exit the area no later than one hour after sunset.
- 4) Shooting hours during the small game hunts shall be from one-half hour before sunrise until one-half hour after sunset.
- 5) Hunting hogs by the use of dogs is prohibited.
- 6) Vehicles may not be parked further than 25 feet from a named or numbered road or parking area.
- 7) Hunters shall check in and out at the designated check station when entering and exiting the area and shall check all game taken.
- 8) Possession of firearms other than shotguns or .22 caliber rimfire rifles is prohibited.
- 9) During periods when the area is closed to hunting, public access other than by foot, bicycle, or horseback is prohibited, except that motorized vehicles shall be permitted on Royce Road year-round.
- 10) Horses and bicycles may be used only on firebreaks and named or numbered roads.
- 11) All users shall enter and exit the area only at the designated entrance off of Virginia Avenue.
- 12) Camping is prohibited.

If we can get a group of dedicated volunteers...

...we can get started designing a trail system, marking it and starting maintenance of it.

Our Next General Meeting

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Our Fall General Meeting will be held on November 7, 2002 at the Lorida Community Center. Refreshments will be served beginning at 6:45 PM and the meeting will begin at 7:00 PM.

The program will include a presentation by Bill Dwinell, President of our association, on the **Management of Lake Istokpoga Water Levels and the Regulation Schedule.**

Vicki Pontius, Highlands County Director of Parks and Recreation, will talk to us about the **plans for a Full Lake Hydrilla Treatment** in Spring 2003.

Beacham Furse, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, will talk about the weed control work they have done on Lake Istokpoga since the drawdown.

After the program all of the speakers will be available to answer your questions.

We hope you will come out and join us for this informative meeting.

Reminder: 2003 Dues notices will be mailed soon. Why not renew your membership for 2003 at this meeting and save both of us the postage.

Regulation Schedule Project for Lake Istokpoga

Many of you may not be aware of the fact that Lake Istokpoga is being included as part of the Everglades Restoration Project. It wasn't always this way, but now it is. Originally, Lake Istokpoga wasn't even considered. Due to efforts of Friends of Istokpoga, and especially Clell Ford, Highlands County Lakes Manager, the lake is now being looked at to see if improvements can be made. The scope of the project deals with the regulation schedule for the lake. As it is today, the lake levels are maintained based on a schedule that was set in place in about 1991. This schedule keeps the lake level high during the dry season and low during the wet season. While this may be nice for the snow birds that are only here in the winter, it isn't the best situation for the lake.

The reason for the schedule, according to the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), is flood control. The lake level is lowered during hurricane season because of the limited capacity of the G-85 and S-68 structures to release water quickly in an emergency situation.

Plans are in place to replace the G-85 structure and improvements are planned for the S-68 structure. These two changes will significantly increase the flood control capabilities. This means the regulation schedule could potentially be modified.

This project, officially known as the Lake Istokpoga

Regulation Schedule Project, kicked off with the first meeting on October 2, 2002 at the Okeechobee Service Center of the South Florida Water Management District. While Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc. isn't a member of the committee, we will be there as "The Public". We are not sure why we are

not on the committee, but the

best we can tell, only government agencies are "permitted" to be members of the committee. The project is jointly run by the USACE and the SFWMD, but many other government agencies are participating members. A few of which are the Environmental Protection Agency, Highlands County, Department of Environmental Protection, U. S. Geological Service, Orlando Utilities Commission, Seminole Tribe, and the Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences

The first meeting was more of a project planning session than real work. The outline for the project has the preliminary recommendation due in the middle of 2004 and the final due in early 2005.

Whatever they come up with, we will be there to try and keep the well-being of our lake as the primary goal of the group.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE REGULATION SCHEDULE? IF SO, COME TO OUR NOVEMBER 7TH MEETING.

Don't miss our Fall Meeting!

**November 7, 2002
7:00 PM**