

Mention cormorants to any fisherman and passions heat up. Cormorants consume up to 2 lbs of fish per day and nest in trees which die in a few years as a result of the significant amount of guano deposited on and around them. While preferred diet of cormorant is yellow perch where abundant studies have shown an opportunistic tendency to consume smallmouth bass and walleye.

In Toronto, Tommy Thompson Park created on a manmade spit of land into Lake Ontario has seen large sections deforested as an estimated 30 000 cormorants nest and breed there. The effect on the lake Ontario sport fishery is as yet unknown. On one island in Point Pelee National Park 41% of the tree canopy is gone.

So while many fishermen demand a cull in Ontario on the other side cormorants are seen by many as a natural part of our environment and deserve the protection they have under various endangered species legislation. A group called Cormorant Defenders International insists this is a matter of humans trying to manage nature.

Cormorant numbers appear to have increased drastically, along with many other sea bird species, as a result of the elimination of DDT use over the past few generations. Peregrine falcons, osprey and bald eagles for example are now seen frequently in the Lake Temagami watershed.

It is estimated that there are 2000 cormorant nests on Lake Nipissing, a lake with an abundant perch population, a fish that is preferred perhaps because of its size. On Lake Temagami, while studies have not been done as yet, cormorant are thought to be consuming herring as they are easy to see in the clear waters and abundant. The good news, if this is true, is that our lake is rich in herring as a result of the deep and oxygen rich waters in which herring breed and grow. It not yet clear that cormorant are nesting here.

Are cormorants any more of a threat to the sport fishery than loons? Loons too are voracious fish eaters but no one complains about them. Perhaps the difference is somewhat aesthetic – loons are pretty and sound nice while cormorant are not. The cormorant fails in comparison as well as a result of the destruction of trees and other vegetation as a result of its nesting patterns and guano droppings on visible islands. Certainly no cottager wants to see dying trees on a small island nearby as a result of guano droppings.

What's to be done? It is illegal to harm, harass or worry a species. Disturbing nests and/or oiling eggs have been tried, both legally and not, but with little success. Perhaps at the very least maybe the studies and revisions of the Zone 11 fishing plans should include some monitoring of the numbers of fish eating species if only at least to create a historical record that will help determine consequences.

All in all it may come down to a question one MNR biologist pointed out in our discussions "what's natural and what isn't".