
THE CASE FOR 100% CATCH AND RELEASE REGULATIONS ON NATIVE SMALLMOUTH BASS IN THE MISSOURI OZARKS

The Ozark Mountains of Missouri represent more than just a geographic region, they are a biological sanctuary for one of North America's hardest fighting game fish, the native smallmouth bass. These fish are the apex predators of Missouri's spring fed streams, serving as critical indicators of water quality and ecosystem health. However, as angling pressure intensifies and environmental stressors mount, the traditional management model, which permits limited harvest, is becoming increasingly unsustainable. To ensure the long-term viability of these populations and the multi-million-dollar outdoor economy they support, the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) should transition to a statewide 100% catch-and-release policy for smallmouth bass in Ozark streams.

The primary argument for a total harvest ban is rooted in the unique life history of Ozark riverine smallmouth bass. Unlike their cousins in deep water reservoirs, riverine smallmouth live in a high energy, resource finite environment where growth is exceptionally slow. Research indicates that it can take riverine smallmouth five to seven years to reach 15 inches, the minimum length for harvest in many "Special Management Areas." In smaller creeks, reaching this size is an even greater feat of survival.

When an angler keeps an 18-inch fish, they are removing an animal that has survived a decade of floods, droughts, and predation. These trophy fish are not merely recreationally significant, they are the most successful spawners. Studies show that larger, older females produce more viable eggs, and larger males are more successful at guarding nests from predators. By allowing the harvest of these apex individuals, current smallmouth regulations inadvertently prioritize short-term consumption over the long-term reproductive potential of the species.

Critics of a total harvest ban often cite angler rights or the tradition of the shore lunch. However, the culture of Missouri fishing has already undergone a massive shift. The MDC's own surveys show that most smallmouth anglers already practice voluntary catch and release. The social value of a smallmouth bass has shifted from its weight in fillets to its potential for multiple recreational encounters.

From an economic perspective, a single smallmouth bass is worth significantly more in the water than on a plate. A fish released today can be caught by another angler next month, supporting local guides, shuttle services, and fly shops multiple times over its lifespan. In a state where outdoor recreation generates over \$12 billion in annual economic impact, the re-catchability of the smallmouth bass is a vital economic asset. A 100% catch-and-release regulation would codify the existing ethics of the modern angler while marketing Missouri as a world-class destination fishery akin to the protected trout waters of the West. While no management strategy is without flaws, the argument that "catch and release doesn't work because fish die anyway" is scientifically outdated. With modern tackle and proper handling techniques, hooking mortality rates for smallmouth bass are often very low. Conversely, the mortality rate for a harvested fish is 100%. In an era where social media and improved GPS access have downsized the Ozarks, making even the most remote secret holes accessible to the masses, the margin for error in harvest-based management has disappeared.

The Missouri Department of Conservation has long been a leader in science-based wildlife management. However, the Ozark smallmouth bass is a finite resource facing infinite pressure. By adopting a 100% catch-and-release regulation, the MDC would be taking a proactive stand to protect the biological integrity, genetic uniqueness, and economic value of our state's most iconic spring stream fish. It is time to treat the Ozark smallmouth not as a commodity to be consumed, but as a legacy to be preserved.