



Great Lakes Fishery Commission

ESTABLISHED BY CONVENTION BETWEEN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES TO IMPROVE AND PERPETUATE FISHERY RESOURCES

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PORTRAYAL OF CORMORANTS CHANGES FROM VICTIM TO PERPETRATOR

Waterbird once listed as threatened have rebounded to un-manageable numbers

ANN ARBOR, MI—Researchers from Michigan State University recently completed a study about media reporting on cormorant management in Canada and the U.S. and concluded that during the past thirty years, representations of cormorants in the print media have shifted from cormorants being the victim to being the perpetrator of risk to wildlife and the environment. The Michigan State University study, part of a larger study jointly funded by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, was aimed at better understanding how media coverage may have influenced public attitudes about the birds and their management in the Great Lakes.

The double crested cormorant is a fish-eating, colonial nesting waterbird and is the most numerous and dispersed North American cormorant. The cormorant received media attention when it was almost extirpated from the Great Lakes basin in the 1970s due to the widespread use of DDT and PCBs. The cormorant was portrayed in the news media at the time as one of the many avian victims of commercial pesticides, and there was strong public support for restoring their habitat and rehabilitating their decimated populations. The commercial ban on DDT in 1972, and protection provided by the *Migratory Bird Treaty Act* of 1918, helped cormorant numbers rebound dramatically. Between 1970 and 2002, the population went from 89 nesting pairs to approximately 115,000 nesting pairs in the basin.

The purpose of this research was to understand how trends in coverage of cormorant management in the print media have changed over the past 30 years. One hundred and forty articles dated from 1978 to 2007 were evaluated according to whether they characterized cormorants as victim, perpetrator, or neutral in terms of risk posed to the environment, economy and recreation in the Great Lakes. Results indicate that depictions of cormorants changed from victim to perpetrator over time. This change reflects a broadening of the impact that cormorants have had on the Great Lakes environment and people. Media portrayal has turned increasingly negative as rapidly growing cormorant populations pose potential risks to habitat, fisheries, and other birds. The number of stakeholders affected by cormorants has increased together with those risks. The greater the number of stakeholders, the more likely articles would be to characterize cormorants as perpetrators of risk.

“The dramatic recovery of cormorant populations in the Great Lakes has triggered numerous concerns about the bird’s potential effects on the environment, economy and recreational opportunities in the basin,” said Bret Muter, researcher with the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University, and lead investigator of the study. “Due to an increasing number of people taking interest in their return, cormorants have entered the media spotlight again and now they are often portrayed as a threat rather than a victim.”

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The media assigned responsibility for managing cormorants to wildlife management agencies and legislators, yet public outreach, education, and risk communication activities have been sparse. Muter added that he believes this research will help managers with future outreach efforts. “Tracking media coverage of cormorant management is useful in helping wildlife managers predict stakeholder attitudes toward the birds and their management,” Muter explained. “Improved understanding of how the media coverage of cormorants influences public perceptions of risk may help wildlife managers craft their responses to media coverage about cormorants and prevent wildlife management initiatives from evolving into contentious issues.”

The Great Lakes Fishery Commission is an international organization established by the United States and Canada through the 1954 Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries. The commission has the responsibility to support fisheries research, control the invasive sea lamprey in the Great Lakes, and facilitate implementation of A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries, a provincial, state, and tribal fisheries management agreement. Visit online at www.glfc.org