

2007 “PERSON OF THE YEAR” AWARD

Gary Isbell



Gary and his father, Roscoe
back in the 1960's.



Gary, contemplating the next place to fish
in the vicinity of Kelleys Island.

From this end of Gary's career in fisheries biology, the events along the way seem to make pretty good sense. But back in the early 1960's, when he first got a glimpse of what it was all about, it didn't look promising. He grew up just east of Toledo and the environmental woes of Lake Erie were obvious, but not easily understood. Regardless, Gary found his way to the University of Washington in Seattle to study fisheries science and completed a Bachelor's Degree in 1975. Following that, he came back across the country to The Ohio State University and got a Master's Degree in 1978.

Gary was offered a job by the Division of Wildlife to work on Lake Erie! He managed coho salmon production at the Put-in-Bay State Fish Hatchery and had research biologist duties at the Sandusky Fisheries Research Station. After four years on the lake, he moved to Columbus and joined the Division of Wildlife's Survey and Inventory Section, which was responsible for design and computer analysis of the state's fish and wildlife research studies. In 1989, Gary was promoted to Program Administrator and became responsible for all Ohio inland fisheries research and management programs. Just a couple of years later, he moved up to the position of Executive Administrator, Fisheries Management and Research. His responsibilities expanded to include Lake Erie, inland, and Ohio River programs. He has represented Ohio fisheries interests on many regional and national work-groups. These included the National Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, the Board of Directors of the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fisheries Planning Steering Committee.

While head of the Ohio fisheries program, he led many projects to improve fishing in Ohio. Below is a list of some of the projects that had a direct impact on the quality of fishing in northern Ohio.

- The steelhead program was improved by substituting the wild Manistee strain for the more domestic London strain fish that had been used prior to the early 1990's.
- The Castalia State Fish Hatchery was purchased and developed, allowing the expansion of the steelhead program to allow for the annual stocking of Conneaut Creek, Grand River, Rocky River, Chagrin River, and the Vermilion River.
- As a result of hatchery production research, the very popular saugeye fishing was made available in 50 inland Ohio lakes.
- During the crisis yellow perch years in the mid-1990's, Isbell led efforts to create a scientifically based Lake Erie management system that brought Ontario into a fair and equitable system to conserve and share perch harvests.
- Unique northeastern Ohio brook trout were investigated and their populations increased by using Ohio's hatchery system and restocking streams.
- In addition to expansion of the ODW's Lake Erie Fisheries Research Units to include a new facility at Fairport Harbor, he developed a centralized Inland Fisheries Unit at Hebron to focus on inland and Ohio River needs.
- Following the creation of the Boater-Angler Fund by the Ohio General Assembly, using state gas taxes, his section utilized the money to fix and improve dozens of state boat ramps throughout the state and purchase and develop numerous new ramp facilities, including the recent Huron property on Lake Erie.

Although he retired from the Division of Wildlife last year, he continues his career as Senior Fisheries Manager with the Great Lakes Fishery Commission. This bi-national organization based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is responsible for conducting sea lamprey control and fisheries management coordination throughout the Great Lakes. Gary is now working to help state, provincial, tribal, and federal fisheries managers in the U.S. and Canada do their best work to protect and restore the very resources that got his interest over 40 years ago.

The Isbell fishing tradition also lives on. He and wife, Pat enjoy fishing western and central Lake Erie with their two married daughters and their husbands, son Peter, and three grandchildren. Gary bought a newer, bigger boat last year. It's for the grandchildren, you see.

The Woods and Waters Club of Northern Ohio is proud to name Gary Isbell as recipient of the Club's "**Person of the Year Award**" for his many career accomplishments supporting the fisheries of the State of Ohio.