Setting Trapping Seasons for Fishers in New York

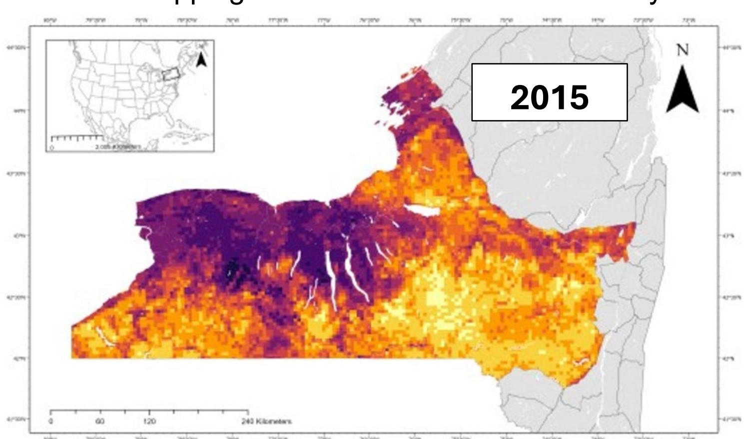
Department of Environmental Conservation

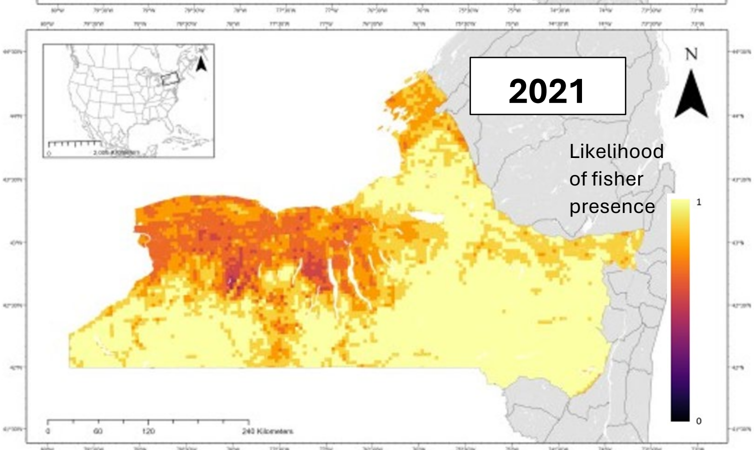
June 2025

Photo by Robert Cook

Fishers in New York

In recent decades, fishers have dramatically expanded their range in New York. Once restricted to northern and southeastern parts of the state, they can now be found throughout all of upstate NY. By 2016, fisher populations had grown to the point where DEC opened a regulated 6-day fisher trapping season in parts of western New York. The one exception to this growing trend was the Adirondacks, where some metrics suggested that the population may be declining. In response, we reduced the trapping season in this area from 46-days to 30-days. We also initiated several research projects to better understand the fisher population and impacts of the regulation changes. These changes and research projects are outlined in the *New York State Fisher Management Plan*.





Since 2016, DEC's research has shown that the fisher population is continuing to expand in western New York even with the 6-day trapping season (see maps at right). In the Adirondacks, research determined that fisher are likely food limited. Despite this, the reduction in the trapping season led to a 50% reduction in harvest, allowing the population to stabilize.

Now that nearly 10 years have gone by, it is time for a re-evaluation of fisher seasons in New York.

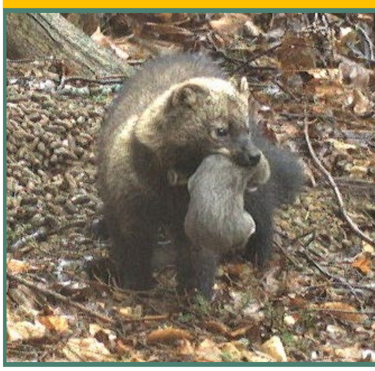
Structured Decision Making

Structured decision making, or "SDM", is a framework for making decisions that is very helpful when there are different stakeholder groups that have competing values and concerns about how a resource should be managed. SDM uses scientific evaluation of population biology and stakeholder values to identify an outcome that best balances competing interests. We used SDM to evaluate potential fisher trapping seasons and determine which strategies best balanced the biological and social aspects of fisher harvest management in New York State.

The Steps of SDM

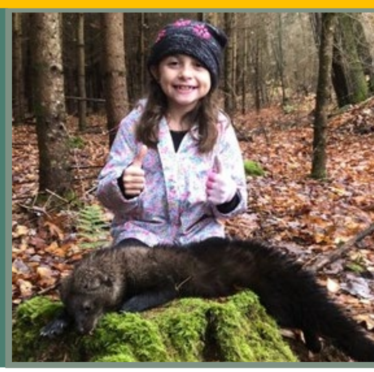
1. Define the problem
2. Determine objectives
3. Identify alternative management actions
4. Evaluate consequences (outcomes) of the management actions
5. Evaluate tradeoffs among objectives
6. Decide and take action!

Fundamental Objectives:



1

Ensure a stable to growing fisher population



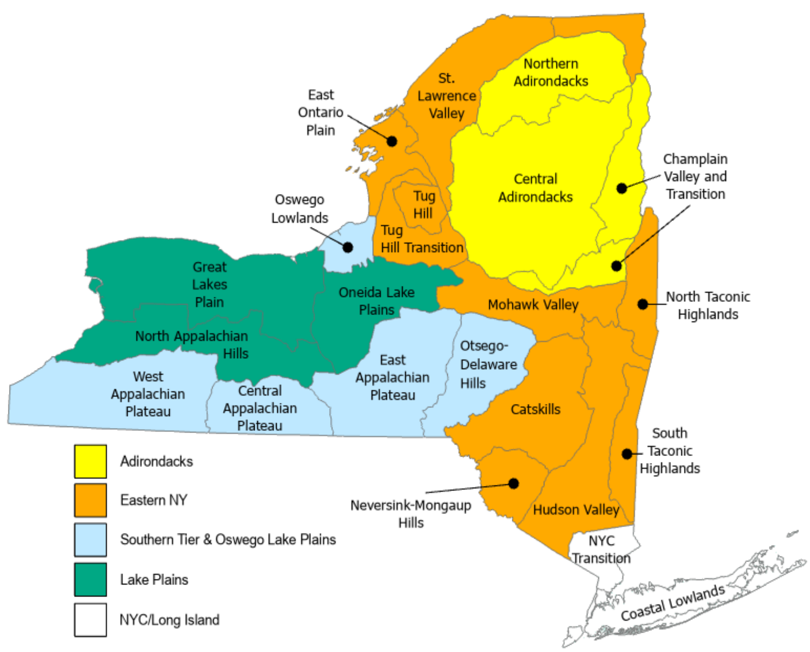
2

Maximize trapper satisfaction

Alternatives

We evaluated a number of different potential trapping seasons for each fisher management area (see map at right). These potential seasons included options such as:

- Extending the season
- Shortening the season
- Adding bag limits
- Moving the season later



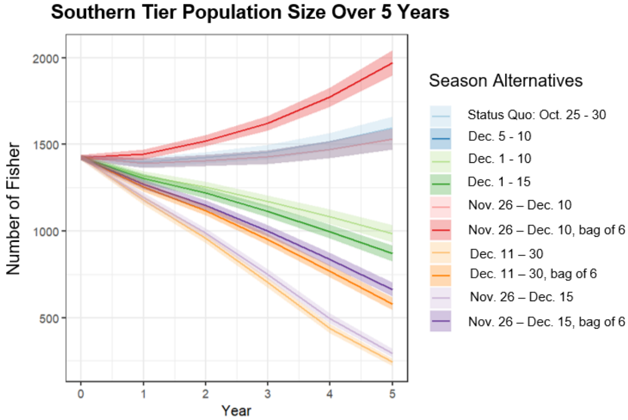
Fisher Population

To ensure a stable to growing fisher population, we had to know how fisher populations would respond to different trapping season alternatives. To do this, we built a population model using results from various research projects DEC has completed in recent years. These included:

1 **Reproduction and survival estimates from a demographic project where over 200 fishers were collared and tracked.**

2 **Estimated abundance from camera surveys**

We then used information from trapper logs and pelt seal data to estimate how many fisher would be trapped under our different season alternatives. By putting this all together, we were able to estimate how the fisher population would respond to potential seasons. In the example model from the southern tier area below, you can see that seasons longer than 15 days would likely lead to a declining fisher population, even with a bag limit.



Trapper Satisfaction

A key part of this decision was figuring out what trappers wanted. To try to answer this question, we sent out a survey to over 7,000 licensed trappers and asked them what factors most impacted their satisfaction with fisher trapping in New York. Although there were some slight differences in trapper values based on where they trapped, overall trappers agreed that **pelt quality** was most important to them. Overall rankings are below.

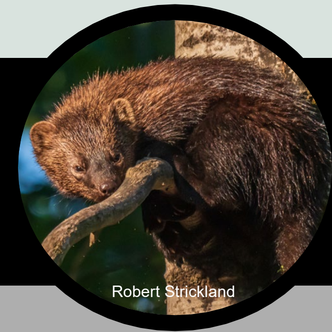
1 **Quality of pelts**

2 **Opportunity** (season length, less overlap with other hunting seasons, weather)

3 **Number of fisher on the landscape**

4 **Success** (# of fisher trapped)

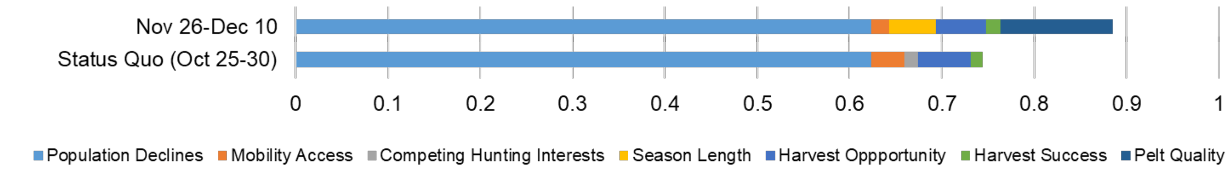
BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

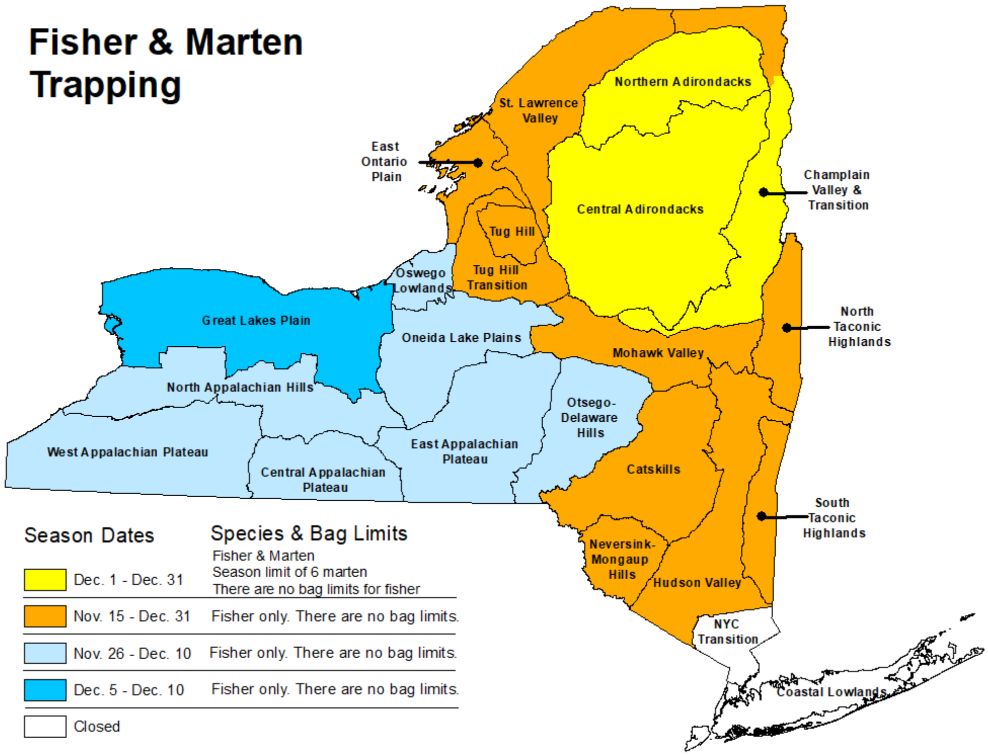


In SDM, tradeoffs among objectives are made by weighting the objectives based on stakeholder values. DEC biologists placed 62% of the relative importance weight on the fisher population and 38% on trapper satisfaction. The weight that trappers put on various objectives related to their satisfaction was determined through the trapper survey. These weights were then combined to calculate total weights for the fisher population and trapper satisfaction objectives. For each proposed season, a "score" was calculated to reflect the degree to which each objective was satisfied.

Setting Trapping Seasons for Fishers in New York

Below is an example of the total scoring for the southern tier area. You can see how both alternatives allow for a stable to growing fisher population, but the Nov. 26 – Dec. 10 season maximizes trapper satisfaction compared to the 6-day season that currently exists.





We performed this type of analysis for the ADKs, southeastern NY, and the southern tier to determine the “optimal” seasons. For the lake plains, we primarily considered the fisher population. While most areas had a robust fisher population that could support a 15-day season, we opted for a conservative 6-day season in the Great Lakes Plains to allow that population to grow.

Next Steps

DEC plans on continuing to closely monitor the fisher population in New York through statewide camera surveys and harvest monitoring. We will re-evaluate the fisher seasons after 5 years have passed to determine whether changes to the season are warranted.

Acknowledgements

Population modeling was conducted by the NY Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit and SUNY-ESF. Trapper survey by Cornell University Center for Conservation Social Sciences. Funding from Pittman-Robertson grant W-173-G.

Photo by Ryan Pennesi