

Local

And the Region

Section

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This 'tag' isn't a game

Conservation
Authority keeping
watch on local fish
populations

By ALLAN BENNER

TRIBUNE STAFF

WELLAND

Thanks to the help of a few hundred anglers who cast their lines into the Welland River, Saturday, about 200 fish are now wearing tags near their dorsal fins.

And those tags will help the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority keep track of the channel catfish, bass, perch, and sheephead caught on Merritt Island for years to come.

Jocelyn Baker, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority's watershed restoration coordinator, said kicking off the program during Family Fishing Weekend seemed like a "nice fit" since they were asking for the public's assistance.

"We thought we would involve the community to come out and help us tag some fish so we could follow their movements through a catch and release program," Baker said.

By the end of the season, they hope to have tagged 2,000 fish in different parts of the Welland River.

But that's really only the beginning of the program.

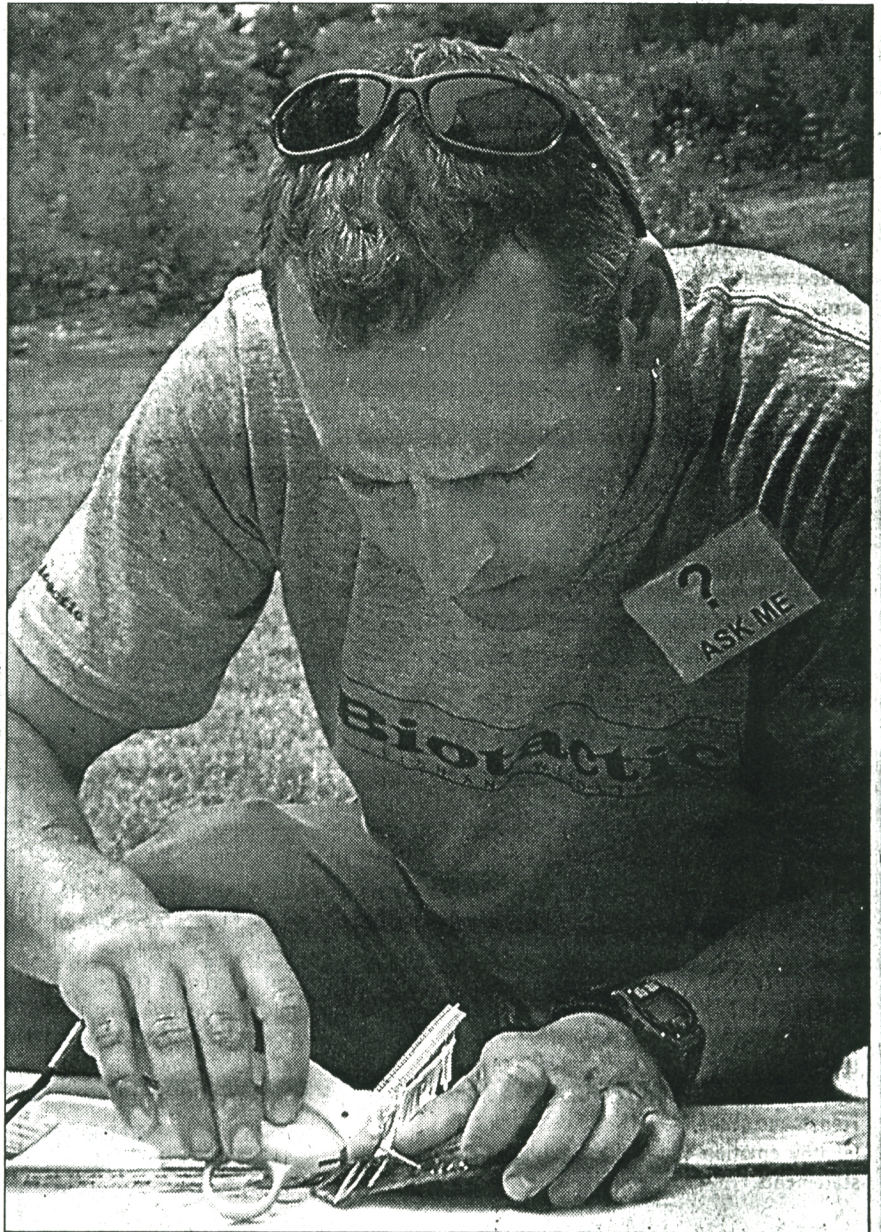
Baker said they're asking people who catch a tagged fish to call the NPCA office and report the length of the fish, the identification number on the tag, and where they caught the fish.

They're also asking anglers for their names and telephone numbers so they can reward them for their participation in the tag and release program.

"At the end of the year we're going to keep track and the top three people that call in the most times will get probably a \$100 gift certificate for a local business."

And everyone who calls in after catching a tagged fish will receive a fridge magnet or a pin.

Chris Bunt from Biotactic Fish and Wildlife, a Kitchener-based consultant hired by the NPCA to conduct the study, said reports they receive about the tagged fish will allow researchers to determine how well fish can navigate through the many obstacles within the Welland river.



Chris Bunt from Biotactic measures and tags fish caught in the Welland River Saturday to kick off the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority's tag and release program. /STAFF PHOTO ALLAN BENNER

"And if people report the lengths back to us, we can also get information on growth rates."

He said it will also allow them to determine how much food the fish have, "whether they're finding a suitable habitat, and we'll be looking at survival as well."

Baker stressed the importance of the tagging program.

"A lot of people roll their eyes and say, 'Oh, you're tagging fish and following them around,' but there's a significant population of people that rely on

local fisheries to put food on their table," she said. "We can't appreciate that because we know where our next meal's coming from."

But one underlying principle behind the study is to make certain the habitat the fish are living in is sufficient to sustain their population. And that will help ensure that people who need that fish to feed their family will continue have them.

"We're always looking at different ways to get a better understanding of what's going on."