

Lake James

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bluegill and redbreast sunfish. According to Bob Brown, a fisheries biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the lake even holds a few rainbow trout.

"There's a tremendous amount of time spent fishing there," Brown said. "The fishery is pretty darned important."

Because of the purity of the water and relative coldness, Lake James is the only impoundment on the Catawba River chain with populations of smallmouth bass, walleye and trout, he said. Though Lake Rhodhiss, the next impoundment down the chain, is close by, it supports none of those fish.

Largemouth and smallmouth bass are the most sought-after gamefish. While some fishermen say the bass fishery has declined over the last decade, Brown disagrees.

"I think probably the bass fishery is about the same as it was 10 years ago," he said.

The fish, however, may be harder to catch because of a growing number of fishermen on the lake.

"I don't think there's any doubt the pressure has increased," Brown said. "But there are some nice fish in that lake. In the spring I've seen some big largemouth bass, but those are hard fish to catch."

Because of the clarity of the water, special tactics are often required to catch fish.

"People who come from other lakes and use methods from there, it won't work as well here. This is

the cleanest water around," Brown said.

While bass are the glamor fish, walleye have their own appeal.

"I think that's the best-eating fish on the lake and the best in fresh water," Brown said.

Fishing has an economic impact on surrounding communities. A recent survey showed most fishermen spend between \$5 and \$25 for an outing, and sometimes more, Brown said.

The Wildlife Resources Commission regularly stocks the lake with threadfin shad to serve as forage for gamefish, he said. Also, about 30,000 to 40,000 walleye are stocked each year.

According to Ronnie Thompson, local officials would be wise to maintain the recreational appeal of the lake.

"Every available human effort should be spent on trying to preserve the quality of Lake James," he said.

For Hal Williams, the lake already seems to have undergone a lot of changes. Williams moved his family from Morganton to the lake 40 years ago, back when there were few fulltime residents there, building a cozy home on Cobb Road with his own hands. His was the first house on the road, but now the hillside is dotted with homes.

"It isn't like it was," he said. "I could walk down the road and kill a mess of squirrels back then."

"Our kids grew up on the lake," said Helen Williams. "All of this was woods then."