**Showcasing the DNR: Where passion meets a career**

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It’s the age-old question many children are asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Well, around the age of 10, Jim Dexter knew exactly what field he wanted to work in, but he never imagined or planned that it would lead him to be the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Division Chief.

Dexter caught his first fish, which was a northern pike, at the age of 3 with his grandfather. Not only was this the start of him being hooked on the thrill of catching fish, but his appreciation for the world of fisheries grew with each cast and catch.

Dexter credits his grandfather for his love of fishing, as he was the one who taught him all the tips and tricks on how to fish.

Throughout his childhood, Dexter spent a lot of time outdoors. He and his friends would share fishing tips, trade tackle and catch bluegill, bass and crappie at a small local lake. If they weren’t on the water, then then were likely found at the local Kmart to pick up the latest lure that came out.

His love for the outdoors carried on to his junior and high school years as he volunteered nearly every weekend at the Bloomfield Hills E.L. Johnson Nature Center.

He helped manage the pond on the grounds and built a dock for visitors to fish from. Here is where he met his first mentor, who he spent time with discussing careers and the outdoors. With a career path in mind, Dexter graduated high school and prepared for college.

In 1983, Dexter earned his Bachelor of Science degree in fisheries and wildlife from Michigan State University. This was at the tail end of a recession, which made it difficult to find a full-time job.

However, Dexter was able to secure consistent part-time positions between the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Michigan State University and the National Park Service.

The string of part-time fisheries jobs lead to a full-time position offer from the Indiana DNR in 1985.

Knowing that his goal was to eventually end up back in Michigan, Dexter waited for a full-time position in his home state to open, which finally occurred in 1987 when the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act was enhanced, which brought dozens of professional fishery job openings to the Michigan DNR.

“The four-hour interview process was nerve-racking,” Dexter said. “I remember prioritizing my locations, with the southwest Michigan Plainwell office being my first choice. When I received the official offer, I received my last choice. But within a couple days and some other staff taking transfers, I was able to secure the Plainwell position. I still live in Plainwell even though I have worked for 15 years out of Lansing.”

Throughout his 36-year career, Dexter has held the positions of biologist, manager, staff specialist, Lake Michigan basin coordinator, acting Fisheries Division assistant chief and Fisheries Division chief.

As he moved through the ranks, each position was a different world. With each position he needed to think more broadly, and his perception and appreciation grew with each position.

“They don’t teach you this stuff in college. You’re trained as a biologist, but you need to learn as you go to hone and grow your management and leadership skills,” Dexter said. “I have had a number of mentors throughout my career, and without their advice and support I would not be where I am today.

“I view my job as chief (being) to break down the barriers for everybody else to help them get their work done. Teams and units and sections produce the results. Sometimes I refer to myself as a gatekeeper or air traffic controller. A good leader needs to set aside time to think about future strategies and objectives for the division, gain acceptance for them and then figure out implementation.”

There have been numerous milestones and achievements over Dexter’s career.

Most notably, during his time as the Lake Michigan basin coordinator, Dexter was instrumental in developing and implementing the lake trout management plan for Lake Michigan. This was no small effort, as the plan took seven years to develop across multiple fish and wildlife agencies, including Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

Another achievement during his time as chief was obtaining two new Great Lakes research vessels and, most recently, a $30 million investment by the Michigan Legislature and executive administration in infrastructure improvements at state fish hatcheries.

“I’m so thankful for the work the staff has put into these investments to ensure our future work to enhance our fisheries resources is secure,” said Dexter. “We continue to be forward-thinking and invest in our future, such as being a natural resource agency leader in installing solar power at our hatcheries to reduce our carbon footprint and help offset electrical needs to save costs.”

The Michigan Arctic Grayling Initiative is another notable project that was begun under Dexter’s direction. In June 2016, the Michigan DNR, in partnership with the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, proposed the initiative that aims to bring back the extirpated species to the state.

The initiative seeks to establish self-sustaining populations of this species throughout its historical range in Michigan. The initiative has more than 40 partners collaborating on the reintroduction.

While preparing for retirement, Dexter has had some time to reflect on his career and share advice with staff and future employees of the DNR Fisheries Division.

“Our future is bright with the staff we have and who we continue to onboard,” Dexter said. “I foresee the division working on broader-scale issues such as watershed and dam management to help our future fisheries.”

Dexter will close out his official role as chief of the Fisheries Division on April 28, but he doesn’t plan to miss out on some volunteer field work during his retirement. He plans to participate in future egg takes, surveys and other field work.

“I’m looking forward to spending more time with family and friends,” Dexter said. “But I also plan to keep in touch with my work family and get back to my roots of helping out on the rivers, streams, inland lakes and the Great Lakes.”

Of course, Dexter will have more time to dedicate to fishing during his retirement.

Michigan is home to tens of thousands of miles of rivers and streams, and he plans to add some more miles to his boots and entries to his fishing trip journals.

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