Erich Ziegler of Crystal Falls MI. with a northern pike speared in an Iron County Lake. (Bill Ziegler photo)

By Bill Ziegler for the Iron County Reporter

IRON COUNTY—Fishing with a spear in the winter is a method of fishing that originated with Native Americans. This historical spearing was first documented in the mid 1700s in Eastern Upper Peninsula Great Lakes waters. __PUBLIC__Early ice spearers reportedly made a frame of wooden poles covered with hides to block the light and waited under it with a spear for a fish to swim by. Spearing fish passed on to non Native American Upper Peninsula fishers and has been practiced ever since. Most ice spear fishing in the last several decades, targets northern pike.

Ice spear fishers are also referred to as dark house spearers since they use an ice shanty with no windows to let in the outside light. The spear fisherman cuts a fairly large hole in the ice to act a viewing window. They typically lure pike in with a fish decoy or live sucker minnow so that they can spear the fish. They can use a large variety of fish decoys some imitating suckers, small pike, perch or ciscos. Some fish decoys have evolved into some outstanding fish art work that is sold as ornamental items to display in your house.

Not everyone can handle being a dark house spearer; it takes considerable patience. If you are the type that is not patient enough to sit in a deer blind then this sport is not for you. Dark house anglers typically enjoy being able to see the fish and compare it to hunting from a deer blind. You can see non target fish that can help you pass the time as you wait for your quarry.

As a fisheries biologist, I monitored ice spearers and I observed that the fish they harvested typically were larger in size than the average tip up ice angler. This is likely due to two factors. Larger pike are often more curious about a bait but do not always bite, while they are still vulnerable to the spearing technique.

The second reason is that spearers cannot release a fish alive if they misjudge the size of a target fish, and most may error on the side of trying to make sure the pike is larger than the high Michigan minimum size limit of 24 inches. Some spearers do practice “view and release” or selective harvest on waters without size limits. Those individuals harvest smaller and medium sized pike and view but pass on fish that are larger but not yet trophy sized. Northern pike under 30 inches are considered to be better as table fare.

Harley Ragan of Chassell, (formerly from Amasa), said he “enjoys spearing for his ability to see the fish”. The spearing hole is like a window in a glass bottom boat for viewing the underwater world. Viewing is not that much a part of conventional ice fishing other than watching for tip up flags.

Dark house spearers prefer waters with good visibility since it is difficult to see the fish well

enough to spear them in murky or heavily stained waters. The spearer has to weigh the trade-offs and decide if their goal is more fish observed, or a chance to take an occasional trophy. The other trade off is quality of the pike fishery vs. water clarity. Clear lakes with strong pike populations are typically the favorite waters to place their dark houses.

Protected bays of the Great Lakes or large inland lakes, especially with direct Great Lakes connections are also very good choices due to good water clarity and typical good pike size structure. Little Bay De Noc and the Portage Lake waterway in Houghton County are two examples of this that annually produce large pike.

Northern pike are common in most of our local lakes and reservoirs although Crystal Falls DNR surveys indicated that there is only a small percentage of pike that are larger than the State Minimum Size Limit of 24 inches, in most area standard pike size limit waters.

The best local pike lake for producing large pike (34 to 40 inch) in our area in recent years has been the Michigamme Reservoir, but has stained water and limited visibility. This is one of several waters where the State Minimum Size Limit has been removed, allowing anglers to take home any size pike they wish to keep.

During my time as a local DNR Fisheries Biologist, I have observed more large pike in several other local waters without a pike minimum size limit.

Sometimes a lake with marginal visibility is chosen due to the pike population and larger size structure. In those cases dropping white egg shells down the spear hole to the bottom sometimes allows the spear fisher to see his quarry better with the lighter contrast on the background. It also helps to place your dark house in shallower water if visibility is an issue.

Spearing equipment is fairly limited and simple compared to the equipment most modern ice anglers have. A fish spear, ice saw, fish decoy and dark house ice shack is the major equipment needed. Compared to other forms of fishing, the equipment has changed very little over the years.

A good spear makes a big difference in your success rate. A skilled spear fisherman can still have success with an inexpensive spear, but as a novice spearer, I learned my success rate improved dramatically when I used a higher quality spear. The act of spearing is not throwing the spear with a large arm motion but rather a wrist motion releasing the spear toward the pike behind the head.

A good ice saw also makes a big difference in cutting your dark house viewing hole and avoids much frustration maintaining the hole. A chainsaw can be used to cut the original hole although it throws so much water it is a poor choice to reopen the hole once the dark house is in place. My son used an ice spud in the past to open his dark house hole although it ended up being considerable work as the ice thickened. Fish spears can be found in area sports shops, although the only specialized ice saws that I could find are available from http://www.darkhousegearandtackle.com

Pike spearing is legal on most Michigan non trout waters although it is illegal to spear muskie on most waters. Pike spear fishers need to use care to identify their target to avoid illegally spearing muskie. Identification of live fish is more feasible than one might think with an experienced angler. One fish identification trick that is taught to students of fisheries biology to differentiate pike versus muskie is as follows: northern pike coloration is white spots on a green background, muskie coloration can vary but typically they have green on a white background. For more pike/muskie identification refer to page 20 on the Michigan DNR Fishing Guide. For pike spearing regulations refer to page 9 and 16 (for you local county regulation exceptions).

Some spearers enjoy carving their own wooden fish decoys. Harley Ragan said “he gets

particular enjoyment out of luring in a nice pike with one of his own decoy lures". Ragan has won state and national awards for his decoy carvings. In addition to Ragan several decoy artists in Michigan have created very lifelike duplications of a large variety of native fish species.

If you are interested in learning more about ice spearing, local fisheries, or where to find collectable and functional spearing decoys, you can join the Michigan Dark House Anglers Association. You can find the Michigan Dark House Angling Association at the website www.midarkhouse.org.