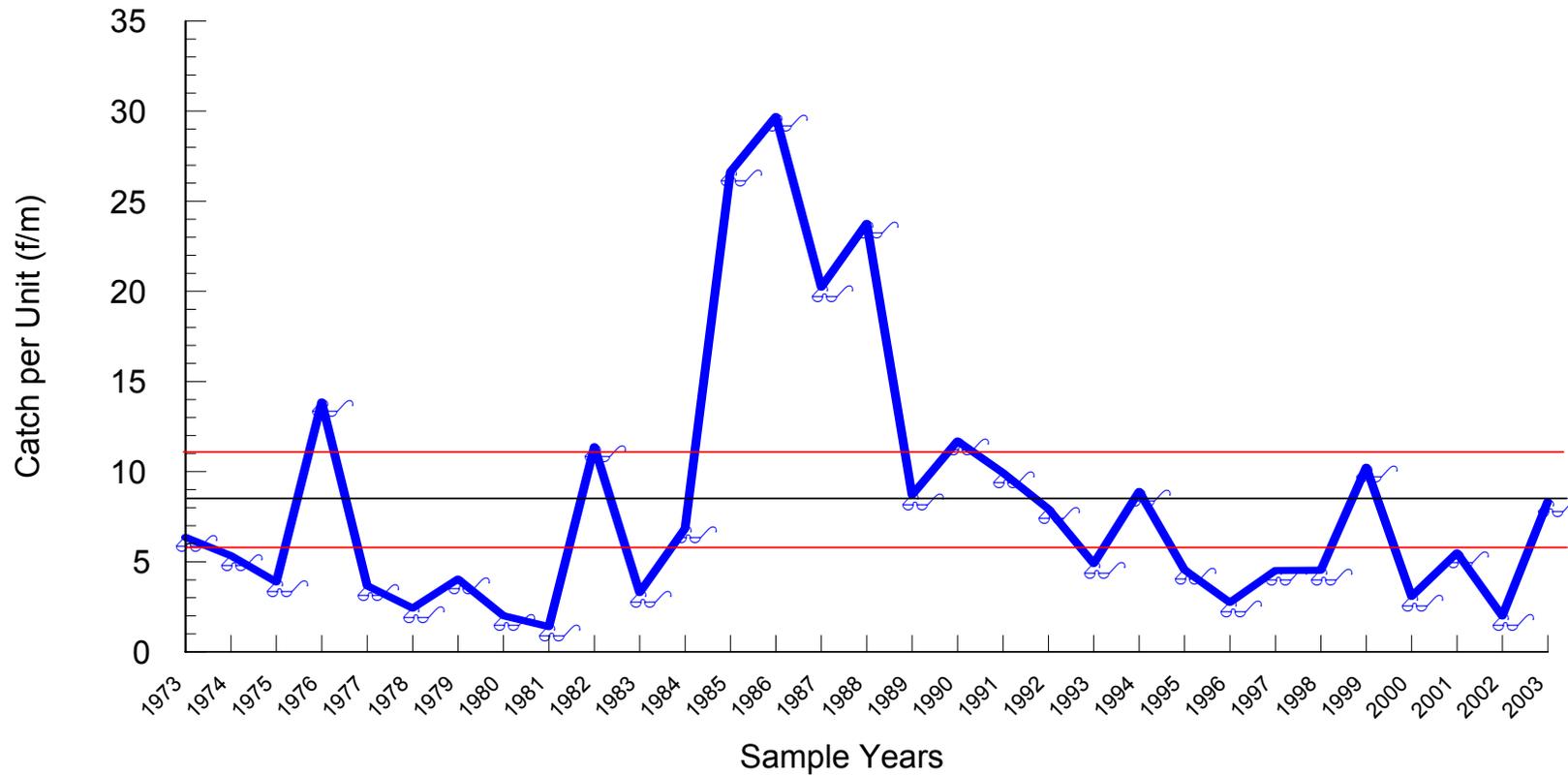


Sampling of recreationally important fish populations (largemouth bass and black crappie) on Lake Okeechobee by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission indicated that these species produced successful spawns and that recruitment of larvae to the juvenile stage was very successful. Black crappie catch rates from the large mesh trawl returned to normal levels (8.33 f/m) after experiencing low catch rates during the latter half of the 1990's (Figure 1). The most significant gains for the black crappie and largemouth bass populations alike was the presence of large numbers of juvenile fish collected in the large mesh trawl and electrofishing samples (Figures 2 & 3). In 2002 juvenile fish made up less than 30% of the black crappie and largemouth bass populations. By 2003 juvenile fish comprised up to 75% of the over all population structure. The return of these juveniles to the population not only provides hope for the continuation of these populations and future of the recreational fishery, but also gives insight into the fragile nature of the Lake Okeechobee ecosystem.

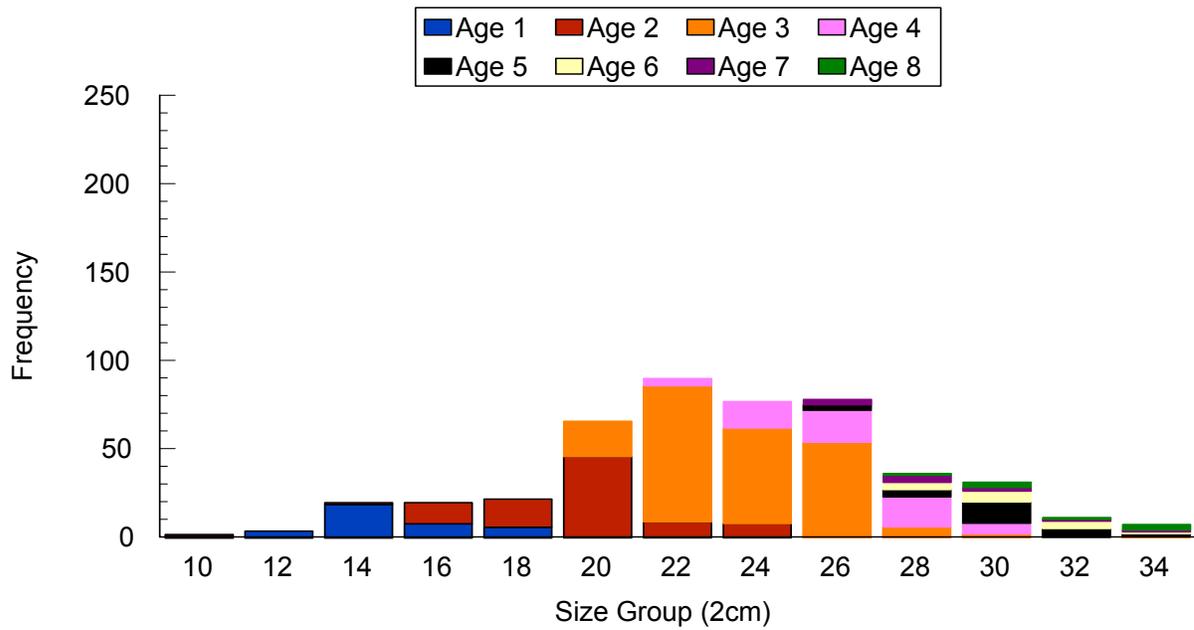
Holding water levels on Lake Okeechobee above 15.5 ft MSL for extended periods of time causes reductions in the acreage of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV). Since the SAV provides larval and juvenile nursery grounds it is important that SAV be protected and expansion be promoted.

FIGURE 1

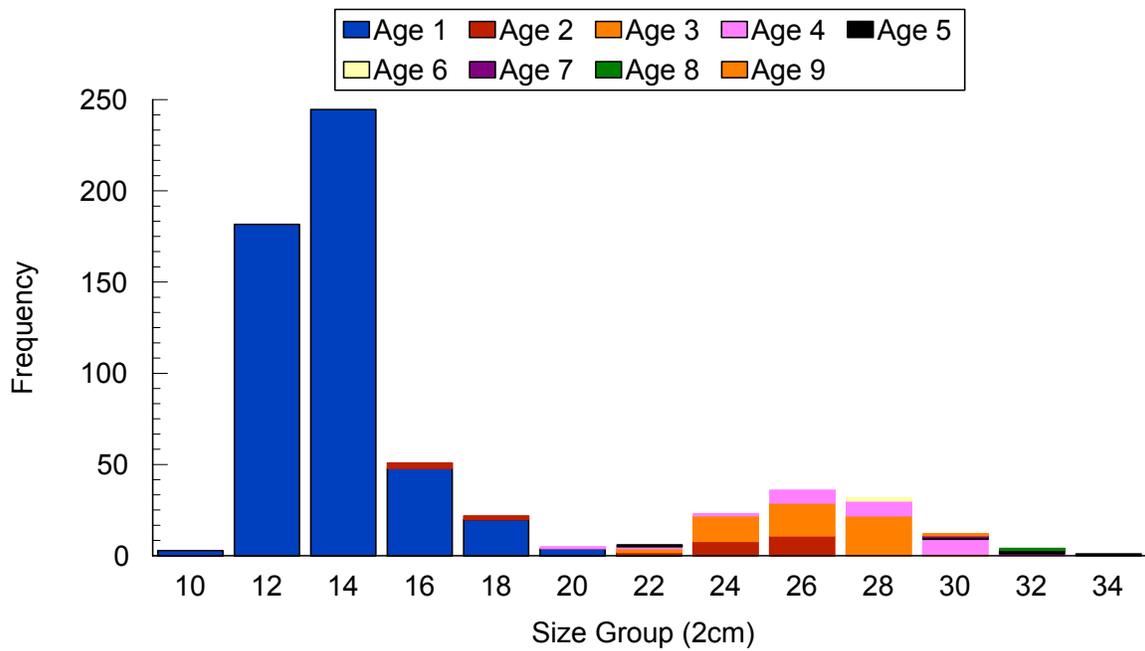


Catch per unit of effort for black crappie collected via January trawl samples from Lake Okeechobee, 1973 through 2003. The black line indicates the average catch rate throughout the time period and the red lines indicate the upper and lower 95% confidence intervals of the average catch.

FIGURE 2

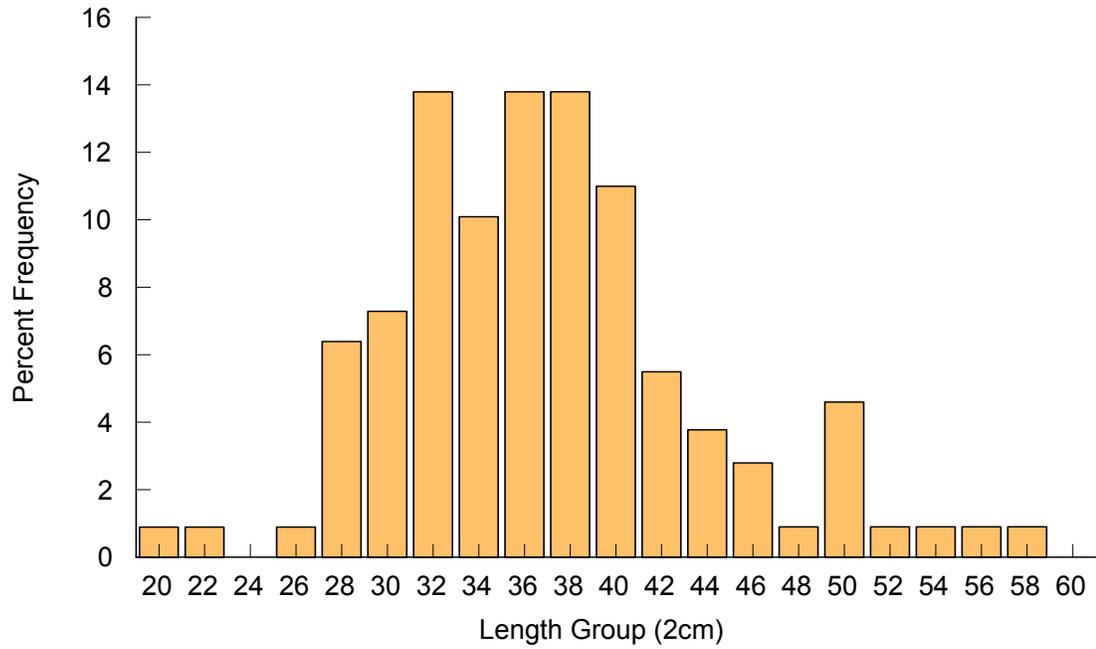


Length frequency distribution of 508 black crappie showing the age composition of each 2cm size group. Samples were collected from Lake Okeechobee with a large mesh trawl in January 2002.

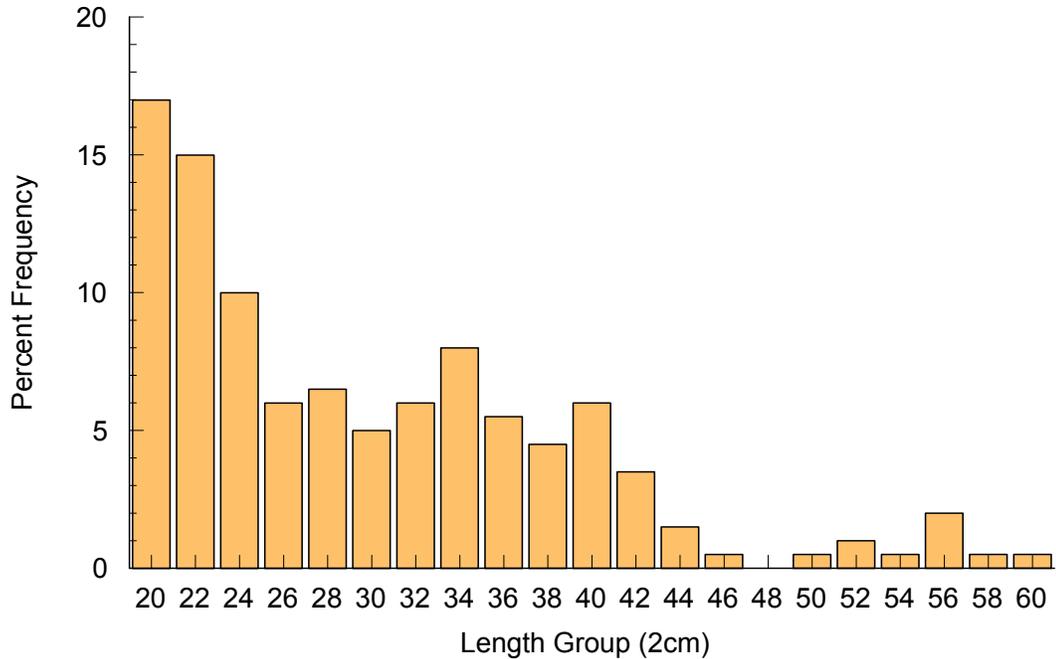


Length frequency distribution of 625 black crappie showing the age composition of each 2cm size group. Samples were collected from Lake Okeechobee with a large mesh trawl in January 2003.

FIGURE 3



Length frequency plot of 109 largemouth bass collected via electrofishing from Lake Okeechobee, November 2001.



Length frequency plot of 200 largemouth bass collected via electrofishing from Lake Okeechobee, November 2002.