

Endangered Fish, Endangered Rivers: Why "Critical Habitat" is Important

by Tamara Wiggans

"Quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem ...the last work in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: 'What good is it?' If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not... To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering..."

Aldo Leopold

Q: How deep is the river and what do you do in the winter?

A: Not deep enough and this year I spent much of November and December wading through government documents and other literature about endangered fish. My answer to a third question "what kind of fish live in this river?" will never be the same.

The Colorado squawfish, bonytail, humpback chub, and razor-back sucker were once abundant throughout the Colorado River basin, from Wyoming to Mexico. These fish, which exist nowhere else on earth, are now threatened with extinction due to the combined effects of dams, diversions, introduction of non-native fish, and other human impacts.

All four species have been "listed" as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and are protected by law. But putting a fish on a list is not enough. Their numbers continue to dwindle. The bonytail and razorback sucker are extremely rare, and are not reproducing in the wild. The only ones left are the old guys who sometimes live to be 40 and 50 years old. Forty species and sub-species of fish in North America have become extinct this century, primarily due to human-caused changes or elimination of their habitat.

The Endangered Species Act requires that the FWS designate "critical habitat" when a species is listed. Under court order, as result of a Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund lawsuit, the FWS has finally come up with several sections of several Colorado Basin rivers proposed as critical habitat for endangered fish. In the upper basin, these include portions of the Yampa, White, Duchesne, Green, Gunnison, Colorado and San Juan. In the lower basin, portions of the Gila, Salt and Verde rivers, as well as the Colorado are being considered.

The proposed river stretches were chosen because they are now inhabited or are potentially habitable for use in spawning, feeding, rearing, or as migration corridors. The river reaches are all within the fishes' known historic ranges.

Why should you support critical habitat? Who cares? These fish are the dinosaurs of the Colorado--they couldn't adapt to changing times--so bye-bye fish. Besides they're just a bunch of suckers, trash fish.

Well, just remember, river runners and these fish share the same habitat--the river. How would we feel if the rivers were pumped so dry that we couldn't float a boat anymore? Could we just walk away and accept that we're the dinosaurs, just a bunch of suckers, river trash?

We live and work in a river environment unique to the planet. It took tough and adaptable fish to survive in the pre-dam Colorado basin, known for its high sediment loads, widely fluctuating flows, and turbulent whitewater.

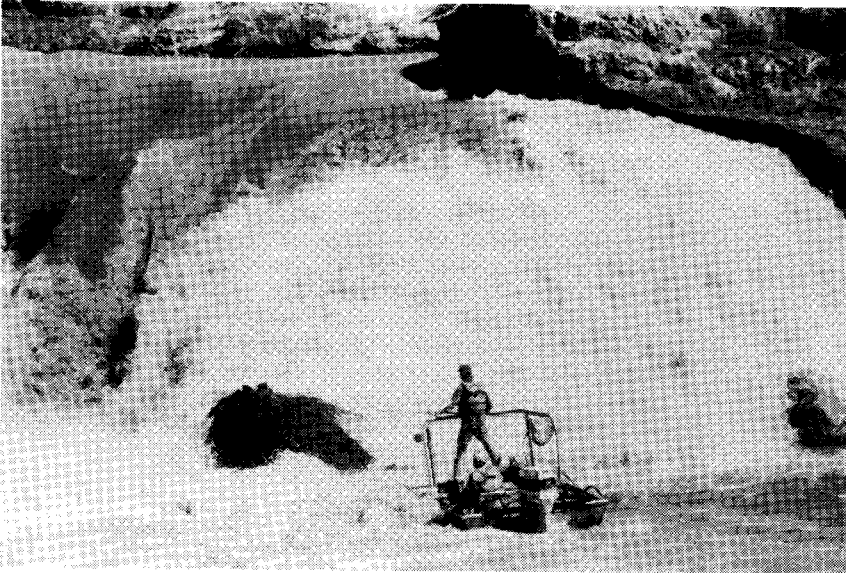
The humpback chub actually likes hanging out in rapids--sound familiar? And the voracious Colorado squawfish once reigned as the top predator in the Colorado River system. This torpedo-shaped hunter has been known to eat mice, birds, even prairie dogs. Historically, squawfish reach weights of 50-80 pounds, lengths of 6 feet, and lived to be 70 years or older. Because of its long spawning runs, the squawfish was dubbed the white salmon or Colorado salmon by early settlers, and we valued as "good eating" and a sport-fish.

We lose more than just fish if we let them go extinct. Their decline is an early warning, that something is wrong, that the delicate balance between the river, and the land, plant and animals, is upset. We're deluding ourselves when we forget that we, as human beings, are just one part of a dynamic, inter-connected system. As many of us have long suspected, the entire ecosystem of the Colorado River Basin has been so drastically altered that the health and survival of many other native species is now at risk.

The water development interests of the Colorado Basin are fighting critical habitat designations tooth and nail, and have even threatened to sue. Once a stretch of river is identified as critical habitat, the needs of the fish must be protected when any new dam, diversion, or other project requiring federal involvement is proposed.

In addition, the "re-operation" of several existing dams is being considered, so as to mimic pre-dam flows that the fish need for spawning. The absence of high spring runoffs to flood back-waters, clean out debris, and flush in nutrient has eliminated good spawning conditions and food sources. Dams block migration routes and alter temperature and sediment loads. Introduced, non-native fish often compete and prey on the young fish.

Water for fish in the arid and rapidly growing Southwest is highly controversial. The FWS held several public



Fish Biologists at Paiute Falls
photo by Gene Stevenson

hearings around the region in late November and early December. A handful of river guides attended the hearing in Farmington, New Mexico, where most of the speakers were highly hostile to the idea of critical habitat. In a room full of water developers, a couple of us mustered the courage to stand up for the fish.

The issues are complicated, and the competing interests are polarized, to say the least. For example, the re-operation of dams might mean diminished hydro-electric capacity, or less water for irrigation, municipal and industrial uses. Most of us live with electricity; we also eat food grown with Colorado River water, and drink water coming out of the system somewhere. Those opposed to critical habitat for fish would have us believe that we're all going to go broke, freeze, starve and die of thirst in the dark.

Progress on these same kinds of issues regarding the Glen Canyon Dam and the Grand Canyon Protection Act is proof that people can come together and figure our new, creative approaches to water management.

FWS needs to hear from the river community. Ultimately, water for fish also means water flowing downstream in the river where it belongs, something I think we can all support. If we can save these endangered fish, we may be saving the Colorado River ecosystem for humans and other living things.

WRITE A LETTER TODAY

* Urge the FWS to designate as much critical habitat for endangered fish as possible.

* Encourage FWS to stand firm in their proposed designations. It's important that they minimize the exclusion process" whereby critical habitat can be excluded due to economic factors.

*The dams and reservoirs are not going to go away. But with more efficient and effective management at existing facilities we can balance the health of the river with our economic endeavors.

*Often the most valuable letters are those that present a different perspective or that provide new information. That is why I highly recommend actually reading the Draft Documents and how much information they will lack. To get a copy or to write a letter, the address is:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
2060 Administration Building
1745 West 1700 South
Salt Lake City, Utah 84104-5110
(801) 975-3630

The deadline for comments was January 15, 1994, but they were considering extending the comment period, so write anyway ASAP.



Quote

"For there are some people who can live without wild things about them and the earth beneath their feet and some who cannot."

Louise Dickenson Rich