

C o l l e c t i n g D a t a
W h i l e C o l l e c t i n g F i s h e s :
A V a l u a b l e I n f o r m a t i o n T o o l

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by

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Fish populations and distributions can fluctuate greatly depending on natural conditions and human activity. Researching all the material you can find on the fishes in your area, and getting to know ichthyologists familiar with your drainage system, will give you a better understanding of the fishes and increase your overall collecting success. Another tool you can use to increase your success and knowledge is a collecting log. Simple log entries recording date, time, location, water conditions, temperature and species caught (even the species you are not interested in keeping) are not difficult to keep if you get in the habit of doing it. While gathering such information on one or two trips may not be of any significance, over a long period time the information you gather will begin to show trends of fish movement and behavior. The information could also give valuable clues to future ichthyologists doing research in the drainage system.

My awareness of the importance of collecting data has increased since I began cataloging my fish slides. My original purpose was to keep track of my slides; I soon discovered the information gathered was also useful in predicting behaviors of different species of fish during seasonal changes and varying water conditions. I also realized I was compiling useful

distribution data. Recent events this past summer illustrated to me how helpful keeping data and communicating with ichthyologists familiar with the watershed you are working in can be.

Last July I was photographing fish in Morrison Springs, Walton Co., Florida, which is in the Choctawhatchee drainage system. One of the species I was photographing was the spotted bullhead, *Ameiurus serracanthus*. I had sent a few slides to Gray Bass (Blackwater Fisheries Research and Development Center, Holt, Florida) to confirm the identity of a few subjects. He informed me there have never been confirmed reports of *A. serracanthus* from the Choctawhatchee drainage system, although there have been unconfirmed reports in the past. What is interesting to me is that Morrison Springs is a popular Scuba diving site, and assuming *A. serracanthus* has been established in the spring for even one or two years, several hundred divers must have seen *A. serracanthus* in this spring and did not have a clue to its identity or significance.

The above event illustrates two points I am sure many NANFA members are all too familiar with. The first is that the general public has a very limited knowledge of our native fishes. The second is that obtaining accurate distribution data is an ongoing and

difficult task that most federal and state agencies are too underfunded and understaffed to accomplish thoroughly. I often wonder what changes would be made to distribution maps if accurate data could be obtained from all of the seine hauls for “bait fish” made by anglers over the years. While the idea of having the general public educated enough to recognize different fish species may be fantasy, there is no reason why NANFA members could not collect data that could be useful to both present and future researchers. Freshwater aquatic organisms are the

most threatened species in North America today. Canalization, development, dam construction, siltation, and pollution are all rapidly and adversely affecting our native fishes. You never know what plans may be in the works right now that would adversely affect your favorite collecting site in the near future. Information you collect on the species you encounter may provide key clues that future researchers could use to ensure that proper steps are taken to protect your collecting sites.