

What I Know About Flame Chubs and Who I Told

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I'd guess that everyone reading this article is concerned about the conservation status of North America's native fishes. That's largely what NANFA's about, along with the captive maintenance and propagation of these species. Most everyone reading this also has another characteristic that we often take for granted: we actually know something about native species, like where and when to find them, knowledge usually lacking among the general public and government officials. I would like to share my experience testifying to the Alabama Environmental Management Commission (AEMC) about my findings on the status of the flame chub, *Hemitemia flammaea*, in northeast Alabama.

The flame chub is a minnow now endemic to the Tennessee Valley, where it's always found in spring-fed streams. It's been considered to be in decline but with little hard data to back this up, although it has disappeared from peripheral areas of its range in Kentucky and from some streams in the Coosa River drainage near Anniston, Alabama. I became interested in the fish's status and, over the summer of 2005, carried out a series of stream surveys mostly in Jackson and Madison counties. Streams of primary interest were chosen from a list of 151 historic flame chub collections in the state based on the records of the University of Alabama Ichthyology Collection.

What I found was that of the 17 historic collection sites that my team visited, flame chubs were located in only five of them. We sampled these sites using seine nets of various sizes (depending on the stream), and, depending on stream size, seined for about 100 meters for 1-2 hours. At one site, a large spring system that produced 29 flame chubs in 1966, only a single flame chub was found.

I feel that I have at least the beginnings of a data set

demonstrating that flame chubs are in decline in north Alabama. My explanation for this decline is habitat degradation of the spring water sources needed by this species. Many of the sites now lacking flame chubs show clear signs of suburban expansion, poor agricultural practices and road widening. The species is disappearing one small population at a time.

Okay, now what? If the flame chub is in decline, whom can you tell in an effort at least to slow down this decline? This took me to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama. The AEMC supervises the work of the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), the state's version of the EPA. Seven commissioners are appointed by the governor and function as the steering committee for ADEM's operation. They make decisions about land and water management in the state on a case-by-case basis. They hold an open meeting every two months and, after the formal business session (about two hours), allow public comment by prior application. I signed up for the November 4, 2005, meeting, and was the first of four speakers. The AEMC meets in a small auditorium that holds about 100 people, mostly ADEM employees, lawyers, reporters and environmental activists.

I prepared a short PowerPoint presentation to support a planned seven minute presentation. That's the challenge: How do you explain all of this in seven minutes to a group who know nothing about it?

My presentation went well. It was formal testimony speaking directly to the four commissioners who were present. I immediately noticed that two of the commissioners were listening to me, and two were studiously ignoring me. This reflected who appointed a given commissioner—the former or current governor—and how “pro-business” they are. One of the attentive commissioners asked me **cont. on page 24**