

## FORAGE FISH AN IMPORTANT LINK

by  
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During these times of conflicting idealisms it is most difficult for a country boy like myself to decide who is telling the truth and who is giving us a straight story. One fact has become apparent, even to me; he who yells the loudest and most often is listened to, and it's his ideas which are most readily accepted by others. Today it seems that some sport fishermen and ichthyologists are clamoring loudly and their cries of anguish are reverberating in the ears of congressmen. Now please don't get me wrong; I was brought up with a fishing pole and enjoy good fishing as much as anyone else, but I can't help wondering just how far the average fisherman has looked into the make-up of the ecological chain of that aquatic life which he is so stubbornly trying to protect. Do they realize just how fine a balance exists in nature?

The category of game fish is clearly defined as well as that of bait fish, but there is one link in the chain which apparently has been neglected, forage fish which are those fish too small to be considered bait fish, yet never-the-less constitute an important link in the ecological chain. These fish comprise a good portion of the food, the meat and potatoes, of the larger fishes' diet.

In the article "Threatened Freshwater Fishes of the United States" Dr. Robert Rush Miller of the University of Michigan and Chairman of Endangered Species Committee of the American Fisheries Society lists some factors he believes to be responsible for diminution of our fish faunas; "Pollution ( industrial, agricultural, and domestic, including toxic chemicals and pesticides ), excessive damming of rivers ( producing lentic versus lotic habitats ), deforestation and over-grazing, channelization, excessive removal of ground water, and introduction of exotic species ( especially predators or those with broader ecological tolerances than native forms ). Exotics may also transmit parasites and diseases."

The above factors are all more or less valid and Dr. Miller is not alone in his beliefs; however, one very basic factor has been overlooked. Of the 300 some odd endangered species listed, how many are categorically game, commercial bait, and forage fish? Obviously the bulk of the endangered species listed fall into the category of forage. Can you imagine what happens when thousands of largemouth bass fingerlings, for example, are dumped into a lake, pond or stream? These fellows are by their very nature

voracious predators and as they grow gobble up just about every moving object in their vicinity. It's as simple as the law of supply and demand; the constant addition of game fish to a body of water will increase the total demand for food, perceptibly to the point where food supply is virtually exhausted.

Game and bait fish are reproduced in tremendous numbers and are cultivated in much the same manner as chickens, but who is looking after the darters, small minnows, dace, sculpin, and madtoms?

How discriminant is the stocking of our waters? Do the people that do the stocking have sufficient prescience of the eco-balance of each and every body of water which they stock? Can they be sure that harmful microbes or parasites are not introduced? Why is it that an ichthyologist at some university can loose thousands of imported african fish over vast acreage and then turn around to point an accusing finger at the tropical fish farmer in south Florida? Again don't get me wrong; the fish farmer must abide by the rules, but these same rules should apply to everyone. Today one can find several varieties of africa - originating Tilapia in the waters of my home state of Alabama. I don't believe that these fish came from a fish farm in south Florida.

Over-stocking has caused a dramatic depletion of forage material which can definitely upset the eco-balance of a body of water which in turn could result in the total loss of any or all of these endangered species. Can we afford to continue to ignore this small but significant link in the chain?

The North American Native Fish Association has recently been formed to attempt to help prevent the loss of our endangered species. Among the aims of this organization are; to promote and preserve our native faunas; to restore and improve their natural habitat; to research, study, compile and disseminate data; and to support and promote practical laws for their preservation. Perhaps we may not carry as big a stick as other groups, but hopefully our ideas might cause responsible people to stop, think, and become aware.

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