

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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RAZORBACK SUCKER FISH IN TROUBLE ALONG COLORADO RIVER

Three thousand razorback sucker fish nurtured on baby food may fill an apparent generation gap found in the Colorado River's declining population of this rare fish, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The generation gap has biologists puzzled. Although there are many adult razorbacks in the river, and spawning occurs, few of the young survive to adulthood and what becomes of the fertilized eggs after spawning is unknown.

The razorback grows to about two feet and usually weighs 8 to 10 pounds. The large "keel-like" hump above the head distinguishes it from the 56 other species of suckers in North America. All suckers belong to the family Catostomidae which is characterized by soft fin rays, extensible sucking mouths and fleshy lips. The razorback's normal olive color changes to a dramatic purple-black on the upper half and bright orange on the bottom during breeding season.

Historically razorbacks flourished in the Colorado and Green Rivers and their tributaries. Biologists became concerned when they discovered a sharp contrast in razorback populations in the Colorado River. In the upper Colorado they were scarce; in the lower Colorado, where conditions are more stable, a larger population of this rare species persisted. This discovery prompted field research which showed the species to be in trouble throughout its range. A cooperative effort among officials from the Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada and California was started this year to culture razorbacks at hatcheries.

In March members of a special recovery team netted about 40 adult suckers during the spawning season in Lake Mohave. Eggs stripped from the females were fertilized with milt from the males and then transported to nearby Willow Beach National Fish Hatchery in Arizona.

The captured adult razorbacks were shipped to Arizona's State-run Page Springs Fish Hatchery where they were placed in mud-bottomed ponds. Keeping captive wildlife whose free-living numbers are few in more than one location is normally done as an insurance measure. If a serious problem should decimate the fish population in one hatchery, a second population would continue to be available.

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The razorback eggs were hatched and kept as fry in an indoor tank where close observation could be maintained. Nutritional problems with the bottom-feeding razorback were anticipated by Fish and Wildlife Service biologists and precautionary steps were taken. A specially formulated diet whose main ingredient was strained liver baby food was prepared and fed to the fish. When they grew to a half-inch the fingerlings were moved to an outside raceway and were fed standard hatchery fish food.

Within the next year the fingerlings will be released into the Colorado River between Lake Havasu City, Arizona, and Needles, California. The recovery team plans to release the young razorbacks when they reach four inches in length, but because these rare fish have never before been raised in captivity biologists can't predict exactly how fast the fingerlings will grow.

Although the immediate purpose of this pilot program is to increase the razorback population, it also will enable biologists to intensify their studies of the razorback's development in their efforts to save it. Specimens of the hatchery-raised razorbacks are being preserved at each growth stage, and intensive field observations will be geared to determine the number in each age bracket. A few hundred of the young razorbacks will be kept at the hatchery for future use as a broodstock for the hatchery rearing program.

Biologists believe that several factors may have contributed to the razorback's decline. One factor may have been the introduction of non-native sport fish into the Colorado River area. Bass, for example, are favored by many fishermen and were brought into local lakes by private fishing groups. The bass may have been responsible for the reduction in the resident population of razorbacks by feeding on the young suckers.

Before dams and other structures began regulating the water's flow, razorbacks spawned annually in the river's naturally turbulent waters. During the March to June spawning season, females deposited their eggs in the shallow waters at the river's edge. Under normal conditions, with a constant water temperature of 61 degrees, tiny fry would hatch from the eggs within a few days.

Dams have had a devastating effect on the fish. As man manipulated the water level in the river, successful reproduction of the razorback was impeded. When the dams were opened to increase the flow of water downstream, the river rose and the water temperature dropped so low that the eggs could not survive. Closed dams meant lower than normal water levels downstream and often left razorback eggs stranded above the water line along the shore.

Another factor which could account for the failure to observe young razorbacks is the difficulty involved in counting fish in turbulent waters. It's possible that there are many razorbacks in the rapidly moving currents, but they can't be counted by conventional means. This leaves razorback counting to be done in more placid waters like lakes and quiet streams--where they may be fewer.

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