

Blue catfish could rule Chesapeake Bay waters



Courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Blue catfish

Mike Mangold of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service holds a blue catfish.



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Big, nonnative and hungry, the blue catfish is spreading into Chesapeake Bay tributaries and could alter the balance of species in local waters.

One reason: As the fish grow close to their normal 30- to 40-pound weight, they shift their feeding habits from a little bit of everything to fish only.

That has some worried about what will happen to smaller species in the bay and its tributaries.

South Riverkeeper Diana Muller has not seen reports of the catfish in her river, and hopes they stay away.

“They are crazy, nasty, big giant fish,” Muller said. “And they will eat everything. There goes our yellow and white perch and other fish.”

But short of paying a bounty on *Ictalurus furcatus*, there is not much to be done about the spreading population. Protectors of wildlife would like to see the

expanding range of the species curtailed, but anglers like the challenge of catching them — they put up a fight.

“There are different stakeholder groups,” said Rob Aguilar, a biologist at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Edgewater. “If you are a guy selling fishing stuff, you might like them. But if you are a bass fisherman, or concerned about the overall ecosystem’s health, you might not.”

The fish is native to the Mississippi and Ohio rivers but was introduced to Virginia’s James, Rappahannock and Mattaponi rivers as a sport fish some 40 years ago.

Blue catfish can grow to gargantuan proportions. The Maryland state record was broken twice last year in the Potomac River. The current record is 84 pounds.

And at that size, they can eat a lot of fish.

“We are finding they eat arthropods, worms, small clams,” said Matt Ogburn, a post-graduate fellow and biologist at SERC. “But as they get over 30 centimeters they are eating mostly fish.”

They eat most any kind of fish, and blue crabs too. Bluefish and rockfish might prefer particular fish, but the blue catfish will eat anything that swims.

“That can be a concern when you are trying to bring back populations of species like river herring,” Ogburn said. And there seems to be a relationship between a growing blue catfish population and the native white catfish. The blues can dominate local waters, virtually eliminating other species.

Aguilar said that in some concentrated areas in Virginia waters blue catfish account for 70 percent of the biomass.

The state Department of Natural Resources has joined the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and others in a monitoring effort to track the catfish's spreading territory. SERC is doing similar work but is also analyzing what the fish eat, and is starting to look at their movement up and down the Patuxent River.

Patuxent Riverkeeper Fred Tutman said he and his helpers net three species of catfish, about one-third of them blue cats. The pier at their new headquarters on the Prince George's County side of the river is one of SERC's eight monitoring sites.

The catfish seem to be adapting to saltier water, which could allow them to move into area rivers. But fresher waters are under the gun as well.

"In many tidal freshwater areas there have never been any large predatory fish year-round," Aguilar said. "Striped bass come to spawn but then leave."

What comes next is hard to say. "There is an effort to try and think of what might be a way to limit what is a pretty resilient fish," Ogburn said. "But the idea of getting them out of the bay is not a realistic one."

So for now SERC, the DNR and others will collect the data needed to determine where the blue catfish will spread, and how quickly.