

FLEUR DE LIS FISHERIES

US Fish and Wildlife Service



US Fish and Wildlife Service Biologists work with other agencies to better understand the life history of Alligator Gar in order to help change the public image of these majestic fish.

Photo: US Army Corps of Engineers

Natchitoches NFH Makes New Partners to Help Tell the Truth about Alligator Gar

By: Tony Brady

For nearly one-half century, people have given Alligator Gar a bad reputation as a “trash fish”. When people ask us “Why are you raising Alligator Gar at Natchitoches National Fish Hatchery?”, we try to explain how as the largest, native, freshwater predator in North America these fish are a possible means to control the populations of invasive species such as the Silver and Bighead Carp. We go on to explain how in the 1950’s Arkansas was known for the Alligator Gar fishing and people came from all over the country to catch a six to eight foot fish on a rod and reel. Nowadays, anglers from around the world are flocking to Texas to try their hand at catching an Alligator Gar to brag about. After addressing the biological and economic importance of Alligator Gar, people then ask, “Don’t they eat all the Bass, Bream, and Crappie that I’m trying to catch”? Being scientists, we refer to studies that have been done on Alligator Gar diets to answer this question. We tell our visitors that the studies show a higher percentage of the

Alligator Gar’s diet are made up of Shad, Carp, Buffalo, and Catfish. The final question most folks ask is “Can you eat them?”. My standard answer is this is Louisiana; we eat anything that doesn’t eat us first. Though Natchitoches NFH receives an average of 6,700 visitors a year, we want to spread the truth about Alligator Gar to a larger audience.

A wise man once said “We should tell the Truth to our family, neighbors, and everyone we meet” and, in order to spread the Truth about Alligator Gar, Natchitoches NFH partnered up in August with the Caldwell Zoo in Tyler Texas, The Children’s Aquarium at Fair Park in Dallas Texas, and Bass Pro Shops to help carry our message to a greater number of people than we would encounter at the hatchery alone. At the end of our Alligator Gar production season, the hatchery still had 171, 14 to 16 inch Alligator Gar. We proceeded to call any Zoo and Aquarium within a 4 hour driving

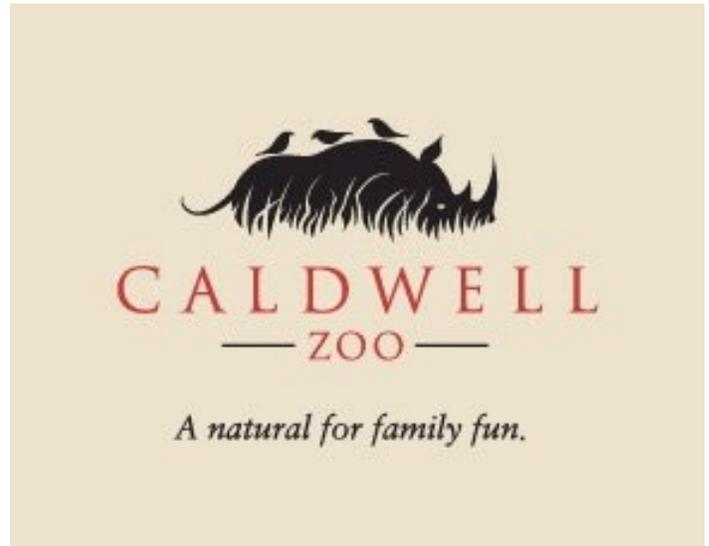
radius of the hatchery to see if any facility would be interested in receiving our Alligator Gar. Both the Children’s Aquarium and Caldwell Zoo responded with an immediate “YES” for a few of the fish. We called our local Bass Pro Shops in Shreveport, LA and offered them some fish. The manager took our information and passed it along to their fish curator, Debbie Crain, located in Springfield, MO. Ms. Crain called within a day and was very excited to hear we had pellet trained Alligator Gar and she



The Children’s Aquarium at Fair Park, Dallas, Texas, is home to six Alligator Gar cultured at Natchitoches NFH.

wanted as many as we could give her. Arrangements were made between Bass Pro Shops and Natchitoches NFH for their Alligator Gar to be picked up on 13 August, and 160 gar were sent to a grow out facility in Oklahoma where the Gar will be cultured for another year before being sent to Bass Pro Shops across the country.

On 22 August, Natchitoches NFH delivered three of the remaining fish to the Caldwell Zoo and six gar to The Children's Aquarium. The Caldwell Zoo currently has two Alligator Gar on display, and these fish have been on display since 1983. Due to the advanced age of their Gar, the Zoo wanted to start rearing some back-up Alligator Gar should something happen to the current display fish. The Children's Aquarium doesn't currently have any Alligator Gar on display but wanted to add some to their native, freshwater exhibit. While at the Aquarium, Supervisor Berrett Christie



The Caldwell Zoo is located in Tyler, Texas



Alligator gar adjusting to their new home in Dallas.

Photo: Dallas Aquarium

and I started talking about other activities going on at Natchitoches NFH, and he was excited to hear that Natchitoches was doing freshwater mussel propagation. Christie and Ben Bosman, a PhD student from Texas Tech University, are currently working together on mussel propagation for East Texas mussel species. I invited both Christie and the Bosman to visit the hatchery and see the facilities we have here and to possibly discuss a future working relationship between the Natchitoches NFH and the Children's Aquarium.



Alligator Gar from Natchitoches NFH will be seen in Bass Pro Shop Aquaria around the country in the next few years.

Photo: Bass Pro Shops.

Natchitoches National Fish Hatchery Trains Walter B. Jacobs' Staff in Archery for Kids

By: Tony Brady

Natchitoches National Fish Hatchery and the Walter B. Jacobs Memorial Nature Park (WBJ) located in Shreveport, LA have had a long-running partnership. For years now, Rusty Scarborough of WBJ has brought birds of prey to the Natchitoches NFH's Open House event for kids of all ages to experience. At this year's Open House, Scarborough learned that Natchitoches NFH not only participated in several archery activities, but that I was a level two archery instructor for the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP). Scarborough, who was once a level one NASP instructor, wanted to get recertified as a level one instructor and get the rest of the WBJ staff certified as well. Seeing the opportunity to return the favor of all those trips Scarborough and his birds have made down to the hatchery, I was happy to set up a training day for the WBJ staff. On 6 August, I met with Scarborough and the WBJ staff and helped unpack their new archery equipment, set up an archery range and proceed to train them to be level one NASP instructors. With a larger number of schools in the Shreveport area participating in NASP, Scarborough wants the WBJ archery program to reinforce the NASP training the kids were receiving in school.



The staff at Walter B Jacobs take aim during thier NASP training.