

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

FEATURE

For Release March 7, 1971

Walker 343-5634

CATFISHES

Catfishes as a group are among the most prevalent fish in the world, represented by members of one or more of the 11 known families on all continents.

They get their name from fleshy barbels extending from around the mouth, usually called "whiskers," much like those hairy appendages extending from a cat's jaw.

Their bodies, as anyone who has struggled to skin them will attest, do not have scales, the outer protection consisting wholly of a thick, slippery skin.

Spines protrude from side fins near the gills and from the backs of catfishes. These are a source of pronounced discomfort to anyone coming in contact with them; the spines are sharply pointed and covered with a secreted "poison."

Despite the prick of the spines, millions of anglers of all ages in all parts of the United States seek "cats" in every conceivable type of warm to moderately cool freshwater. (Catfishes are also found in salt water, but they are not important sports fish.)

The toxic quality of those spines also doesn't affect flesh of catfishes, long a traditional delicacy--and sometimes a staple--particularly in the Mississippi Valley. But the favorite eating fish is the channel cat.

Fish cultural laboratories at Marion, Alabama, and Kelso and Stuttgart, Arkansas, operated by the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, advise commercial and sport interests on propagation and rearing techniques for channels, whites, blues, and the bullheads.

The laboratories concentrate much of their research effort on how to integrate channel catfish-growing with farming; improve production methods for channel fingerlings for stocking reservoirs and ponds; develop better nutritional feeding schedules and disease and parasite control measures; and establish ways for harvesting fish crops and preparing them for marketing.

With the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, State agencies, and such universities as Auburn, plus private enterprises, channel catfish farming for both sport and commerce now is a multi-million dollar industry spreading rapidly throughout many areas of the country.

A wide variety of catfishes live in clean or muddy waters and are able to withstand some domestic pollution. They are as tenacious in hanging onto habitat as carp, and feed on live and dead food of wide variety. The whiskers help the cats feel their way to food items in the turbid waters during the darker hours of day and night.

Although cats are called the "poor man's fish" because of simple tackle required, hordes of anglers from all walks of life attest to their importance in the United States.

The blue and flathead catfishes inhabit larger rivers, including the Mississippi, and grow to considerable size, some blues weighing more than 150 pounds. Catching these giants can be a challenge for any angler.

Channel catfishes have a larger following on a wide variety of waters--streams, lakes, or ponds--and may grow beyond 20 inches and weigh as much as several pounds. But the smaller, ubiquitous bullheads have the greatest popularity.

Baits for catfishes can be a wide variety of food items. Even wild grapes and chunks of laundry soap have been known to produce results. "Purists" among the followers, however, have their educated bait preparations, often rather "ripe" and strongly odorous, such as "stink bait," entrails and coagulated blood.

Because so many people enjoy both catching and eating catfishes, they should have a lasting place in the United States as the source of rewarding recreation and good food.

x x x

