DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
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Fish and Wildlife Service

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE STUDIES CORMORANT TO HELP CURB RECREATIONAL AND AQUACULTURAL LOSSES

A bird once so imperiled by DDT it was almost listed as endangered, but now so abundant it's become a nuisance to many fish farmers and recreational anglers nationwide, is the focus of a three-part, multi-year research and management effort by the Interior Department's Fish and Wildife Service, agency Director John Turner announced.

"The double-crested cormorant represents one of the most ironic wildlife success stories in the past quarter century," Turner said. "In the late 1960's, many wildlife scientists thought the bird would be one of the first additions to the U.S. endangered species list." But since the early 1980's--more than a decade after DDT was banned and its effects in the environment began to fade--this species has been increasing its population by nearly 7 percent each year. "Unfortunately," Turner adds, "this phenomenal recovery appears to be fed, literally, by a commercial fish farming industry that also has experienced a rapid growth throughout the past decade. In some locations, cormorants have benefitted from the artificial stocking of fish for recreational purposes. In one case documented in Utah, the cormorants' take of stocked trout far exceeded the catch by anglers."

The cormorant is a migratory water bird that feeds almost exclusively on fish. It nests in northern states and Canada and winters throughout the South and into the Caribbean. Its migration route down the Mississippi Valley takes it through the very heart of the burgeoning new fish farming, or aquaculture, region of the United States. In Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, there are several hundred commercial catfish farms; while from Arkansas northward to Minnesota, commercial production of bait minnows and rainbow trout have become strong growth industries in recent years. Concerns in the Northeast and Northwest focus on the potential impact of cormorant predation on out-migrating juvenile salmon.

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"The cormorant situation presents some very significant challenges," according to John Nickum, the Service's national aquaculture coordinator. "It's fully protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so commercial producers and anglers simply cannot take bird control measures into their own hands. If fish producers can demonstrate predation problems, our Law Enforcement branch can issue permits to kill preying birds. But our hope is that these new studies and field applications will provide an information base from which management plans can be developed. The plans can show the way to effective, low-cost, non-lethal ways to keep the cormorants away from the aquaculturists' cash crop."

The first of the three efforts will provide $200,000 for the Service's Northern Prairie Research Center in Jamestown, North Dakota, to look at the population dynamics and basic biology of the cormorants in the Central Flyway. The second study will be conducted by the Mississippi Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit, Mississippi State University, and will explore the effects of various control strategies. Lastly, the Maine Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit, University of Maine at Orono, will look at the effects of cormorant predation on Atlantic salmon, a species several New England states and the Service have been trying to restore as a recreational species since the 1970's.

"Fish farmers we have worked with understand how complex this situation is and have shown great patience and support while we were designing these studies," Nickum said. "What we're hoping for is a 'win/win' solution by which a migratory bird is accorded protection, while a new industry is given the opportunity to develop and grow, and certain recreational fisheries can be effectively restored.

Fish farming in the United States--especially for trout and catfish--has experienced rapid expansion since the 1970's. In 1990, the Service issued a revised and expanded National Aquaculture Policy outlining and emphasizing the agency's commitment to work with the industry to share fish culture technologies, including nutritional and disease control information.

"Good aquacultural practices can actually benefit conservation of some wild fish by alleviating harvest pressures on certain diminishing wild stocks," Nickum said. He added that the Service over the past century has helped provide a foundation for the inland freshwater fish farming industry through its fisheries research and hatchery development.

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