

Harry Lupton 1-22-1113

Caddo Lake Possibly Facing Troubled Waters



Steve Knight

The pristine waters of Caddo Lake may be a chemical time bomb waiting to explode.

Detection of mercury in the 25,400-acre reservoir threatens to taint this East Texas jewel that is scheduled for even greater things in the future. The mercury

was first discovered by Louisiana officials a year ago, and the two states are preparing to confer about future plans.

The source of the mercury is undetermined at this point. Many people will be looking at the adjacent Longhorn Army Munitions Plant and other heavy industries as the source. However, the chemical is sometimes found naturally in acid waters such as those found in East Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas. According to sources, preliminary studies have said the level in Caddo is higher than in Lake O'The Pines located above the lake or Toledo Bend and others that are down river.

"The reports in Louisiana, raised the concerns for various agencies in Texas," said Dr. Dave Sager of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department's Resource Protection Division.

"Both Parks and Wildlife and (Texas) Department of Health are looking at it. We are just now getting the results."

Sager said mercury is being found more and more throughout the southeastern United States in recent years. Discovered first in the Florida Everglades, it is believed to be transmitted airborne in a form of acid rain.

The state agencies, along with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency and the Sabine River authority, are pres-

of the sampling has been done thus far. That doesn't mean others along the Sabine River won't be surveyed.

"We have already taken some samples, and are looking at doing even more," said Sager.

For fishermen and other visitors to Caddo, the problem isn't going to be noticeable. Bass and other fish aren't glowing in the dark, and silver layers of mercury aren't showing up on cypress stumps.

"We haven't seen anything like that so far. What we are going to look for is sub-level effects on behavior or reproduction," said Sager. He added there shouldn't be any long-ranged effects on wildlife at the lake, but fish could be another matter.

"I don't think we have to worry about the wildlife aspect," said Sager, "but there may be some from fisheries. The wildlife don't concentrate there over a long period of time. And you can get mercury out of the body. Fish don't leave. It stays there and continues to build up the levels."

This build up could lead to a change in regulations on the lake. The regulations could actually benefit big bass on the lake.

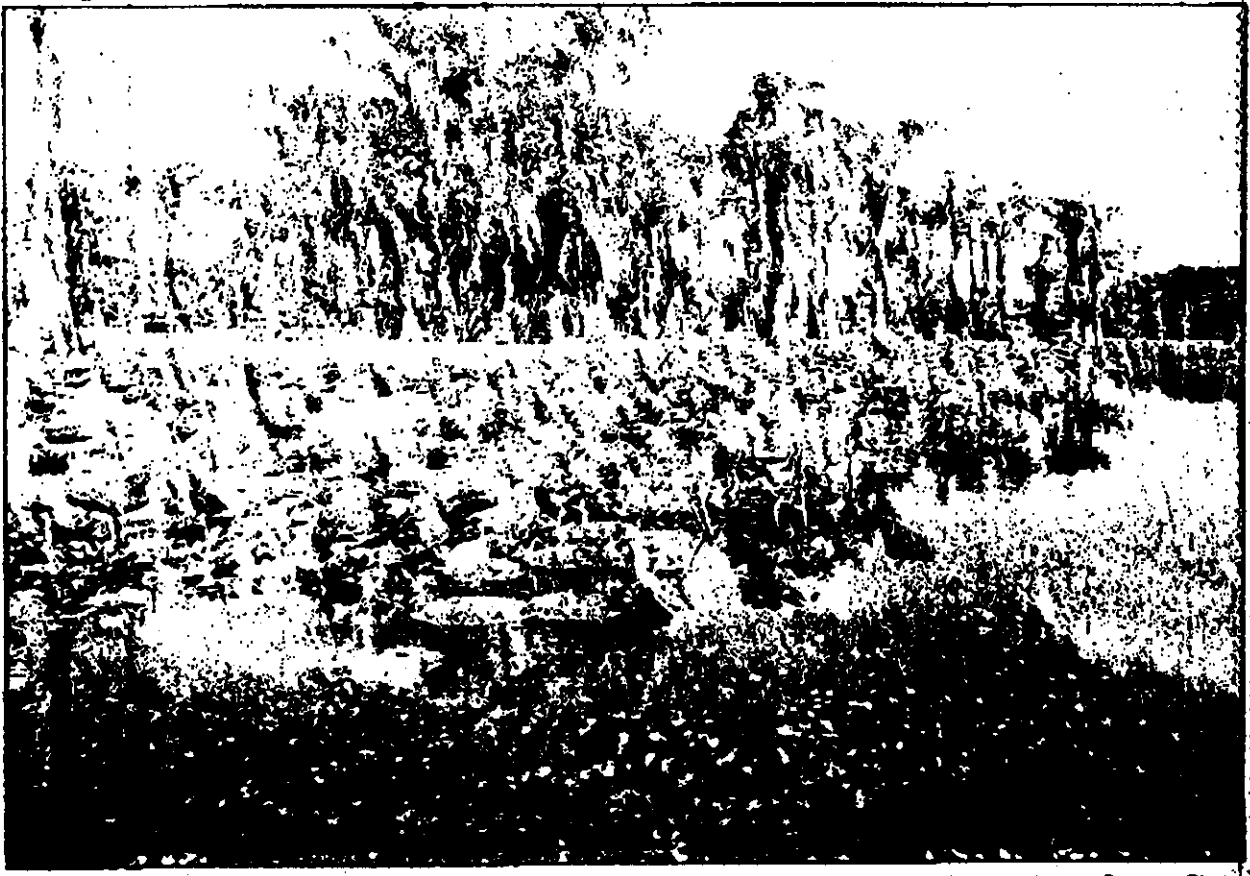
"Mercury offers more and better management (options). Since it builds up in larger fish, the thing to do is slot limits where people don't have to worry about size," said Sager.

"What we don't want to do is have a regulation that encourages the harvest of the fish in a size that harms the fishermen," said Allen Forshage, TP&WD Fisheries Division regional director from Tyler.

Forshage said the department is already in the process of managing Caddo as trophy bass fishery with its three fish, 14- to 18-inch slot.

"We may have to change it to a 14-inch maximum," he said.

At this time, however, the Texas Department of Health has not issued a warning on eating fish from Caddo Lake. These are uncorrelated advisories fish from lakes Welsh,



-Courtesy Photo

DISCOVERY OF MERCURY IN CADDO LAKE COULD RESULT IN REGULATION CHANGES Health Advisory Has Not Been Placed On Eating Fish From The Lake At This Time

Brandy Branch and Martin Creek. These advisories were placed because of the presence of another heavy metal, selenium.

Forshage agreed with Sager's assessment that there have been no signs of problems with any of the diverse fisheries or habitat on the Texas side of the reservoir.

"We haven't seen a problem with the fishery. In fact Caddo Lake has done well in producing big fish. As far as aquatic habitat, if anything we have too much," said Forshage.

Although it certainly puts a damper on it, the mercury problem is

not expected to slow Caddo Lake initiative, a plan to protect the unique corner of Texas and promote sustainable development in the area. The keystone to the plan is the 7,500-acre Caddo Lake State Park and Wildlife Management Area. This includes the majority of the wooded portion of the lake on the Texas side.

In fact, it may not be the most formidable problem facing the initiative and the newly formed Cypress Valley Alliance in the short term. That may be continued federal funding. The project's biggest supporter, Democrat Rep. Jim Chapman, must

now seek additional funds from a Republican controlled Congress.

Projects already funded which are under way include planning and site selection for an environmental education center. A new ramp and improved location signs are also expected soon.

Sager said more should be known about the mercury problems when Texas, Louisiana and federal officials finally get together. A meeting is expected within the next 60 days.

Steve Knight is outdoor writer for the Tyler Courier-Times Telegraph. His columns appear Sunday and Thursday.