

Caddo Lake: a treasure in trouble

Jefferson Jimplecute
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By James F. Robertson

Decades of changing conditions of Caddo Lake and the introduction of one woe after another have finally put the treasured body of water into deep trouble.

That was the picture that emerged in a free wheeling discussion between Texas Parks and Wildlife officials, the Greater Caddo Lake Association and interested citizens here Saturday on the shores of the lake at Big Pine Lodge in Uncertain.

The crowd of about 100, jammed into a room that would accommodate only about 50 comfortably, was vociferous in wanting something done immediately following a presentation by Mike Ryan, Texas Parks and Wildlife Biologist for the lake.

Ryan presented a picture of the lake, using colored slides, which showed how it changed through the seasons from fairly open water in the spring of the year to a waterway choked by vegetation before the onset of winter, except in its deepest waters and where boat roads churn and cut up vegetation.

The vegetation is the chief cause of concern but also mercury contamination of fish came in for a share of the attention. The latest problem to arise has been the discovery of the very prolific and invasive hydrilla plant.

It was first found in the Ames Springs section of the lake last year covering about 500 acres. By June of 1997 the plant had expanded to clog 5,000 acres.

What is happening to the lake is that it no longer flushes itself and turbidity is low because of the dam which has created Lake of the Pines and the Louisiana spillway near Oil City. Both slow the flow of the water and inhibit the lake's natural flushing action during high-water periods.

The result is that one-quarter to one-half inch of silt is added every year to the lake bottom. In turn, this silt provides the nutrients to further fuel the growth of water-choking plant life, which is not limited to hydrilla, but also includes water hyacinth, another invader from Asia, as well as native species.

The decaying vegetation also uses up oxygen with resultant fish kills in shallow area, which most of the Texas side of the lake is.

Ryan, and his supervisor David Terre out of the TP&W office in Austin, who also participated in the discussion following Ryan's talk, didn't hold out a lot of immediate hope for relief in the near future.

Hydrilla can grow in water as deep as five to 17 feet depending on the amount of light that penetrates. Water that is turbid and cloudy such as is associated with flood conditions inhibits light and restricts its growth.

Chemicals which would be the most effective in treating the hydrilla would cost about \$1,000 an acre, meaning expenditures in the millions, Ryan said. Cheaper chemicals can knock hydrilla back, killing it on the surface but not damaging about half the plant, which remains below the water were not viewed very favorably either.

The introduction of grass carp, a plant eater which was effective in helping clean up hydrilla-infested Lake Conroe, was looked upon as the solution by some in the audience.

Ryan, explained because of the problems of introduced species in the past which have gotten out of control, great caution is practiced. One problem of the grass carp is that it does swim against currents as do most fish, but moves with the current.

This means the carp would not be contained in Caddo but would escape over the spillway and into Red River.

They live 12-13 years and are
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voracious feeders on any plant life. Hydrilla is on their preferred list, but if it is not present they start on something else, Terre said. The hydrilla, which were of the diploid type, that were introduced in Lake Conroe did escape because they were able to reproduce.

The carp now being used are Triploid and sterile.

One man in the audience was ready to put some carp in now and gamble there wouldn't be any adverse results. He went on to ask the question of where could he get some; and if he introduced them into the lake himself, how many years would he have to spend in prison.

"I'm getting pretty old," he said, "and it might be worth it."

Another question from the audience was why couldn't we just turn enough water loose from Lake of the Pines to create a big enough flood to flush Caddo and increase the turbidity of the water to inhibit aquatic

growth.

Ryan explained that there were enough building and dwelling now in what used to be flood plain to make

this unfeasible.

There was some discussion of raising the water level of the lake, placing barriers on the Louisiana spillway to keep the carp in and transferring them back into the areas of the lake where they are needed and rebuilding the spillway where it could be opened at the bottom to help flush out the silt.

The mercury found in fish at the present time has caused a ban on eating more than two meals of eight ounces by an adult and two of four ounces by a child a month of large-mouth bass, freshwater drum and white bass.

No source point has been found for the mercury pollution. It is thought to be atmospheric as the condition is widespread across the Southeast United States.

One question asked was why can't all the federal and state agencies get together and do what needs to be done.

Ryan said that although several agencies were involved in looking at the lake, they are being cooperative and he expects their findings to be shared.