

Prehistoric paddlefish distributed in Caddo Lake

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USFWS aquatic biologist, Pete Diaz holds one of 47 paddlefish recently released into Caddo Lake. Jorge Ribas/Nature Conservancy

Potentially gigantic fish with prehistoric connections were recently reintroduced into Caddo Lake in an effort to determine the long term viability of the fisheries' habitat for future stockings of paddlefish.

Listed as a species of concern under the Endangered Species Act, paddlefish have allegedly roamed the waters of the Mississippi River Basin since the days of the dinosaur. The fish, coveted for their roe as a substitute for caviar, were uprooted from Caddo Lake and its tributaries following the construction of a dam in 1959 that spawned Lake O' the Pines on Big Cypress Bayou.

A consortium that included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Caddo Lake Institute recently distributed 47 paddlefish near the Texas-Louisiana border of the fishery that spans both states.

"We had a zero mortality rate when we stocked them, which is awesome. We were surprised at that," said Pete Diaz, a USFWS aquatic biologist. "If we had lost five to seven fish, we thought that would be acceptable."

The fish were surgically implanted with a radio transmitter that allows scientists to keep track of their movement.

“We have collected data already on all but two fish, although we don’t assume those two have expired,” Diaz said. “There have been some dings as the fish have moved around the lake. We expect about three or four to expire during the six months of our study.”

Caddo’s paddlefish were raised at the Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery in Oklahoma. Approximately two to three feet long, the fish are 18 months old. The public and school children can watch the movement of the fish by visiting www.CaddoLakeInstitute.us, according to a release.

An adult paddlefish is capable of growing to 7 feet and weighing as much as 200 pounds, while living up to 30 years. They have few predators, according to Diaz.

“Man I guess is one, because they could be accidentally snagged by an angler — and I guess an alligator could get one, although that isn’t very likely,” Diaz said.

Paddlefish eat plankton and are known as filter feeders.

Local attorney Marshall Jones is a Caddo Lake Institute board member and he said stocking paddlefish in the lake is critical.

“Our Caddo Lake is a very special and significant ecosystem, certainly one of the most beautiful wetlands — and most beautiful flooded forest of bald cypress — in all of America,” Jones said. “But it is as fragile as it is special and beautiful, and as a result we need to protect the lake and its associated watershed and educate future generations so our children and their children will be stewards of our beloved Caddo Lake. That is one of the main missions of the Caddo Lake Institute.”

Recording artist Don Henley, chairman of the board of the institute, said in a release that the paddlefish experiment is

possible because of the work of many partners to restore flows to Caddo lake, including The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, the USFS and the TPWD.

“Caddo Lake is a special place,” Henley said. “It’s a ‘Wetland of International Importance’ under the 1973 Ramsar Convention, a treaty now signed by more than 160 nations. But to keep it a healthy and ecologically productive system, we need flows that better mimic the natural patterns of high and low conditions.”

Several project partners are planning a paddlefish festival in Jefferson, Texas, May 8-9.

Just the facts

- Three stationary radio signal receivers implanted in the fish will enable the tracking and monitoring of the fish for at least six months. The transmitters may generate a signal for up to 494 days.
- Like many fish, paddlefish spawn in the same place generation after generation. Paddlefish have been known to migrate up to 100 miles to find suitable habitat for spawning.
- The goal of the study is to gather data that will support the proposal for long-term revisions to the releases from Lake O’ the Pines. Success will also support a plan for a large-scale reintroduction of paddlefish to the area in the future.