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Release of 31 paddlefish to help gauge habitat health at Big Cypress

By Caleb Brabham
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JEFFERSON — Thirty-one paddlefish are set to be released today into Big Cypress Bayou as part of a kickoff to the annual Paddlefish Festival.

The festival, sponsored by the Collins Academy, is an event in Jefferson that helps teach students about nature and wildlife.



The fish will help researchers determine whether habitat for the species has improved in the past couple of years and what impact stream flow alterations have had.

"Federal fisheries, the Caddo Lake Institute, Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Collins Academy are working towards re-establishing the paddlefish population at Big Cypress that was destroyed during the building of the dam at Lake O' the Pines," said Collins Academy Director of Education Outreach Libby Horton.



According to Horton, 47 paddlefish released in 2014 were outfitted with radios to track their movements. Because batteries powering those radios have expired in the past two years, another 31 paddlefish will be released to provide more data.

"The paddlefish are an indicator of the health of the ecosystem," Horton said. "If paddlefish can survive, then we have a good ecosystem. They are sensitive to the environment. If the environment is disrupted, they disappear, which is what happened before."



Horton said Collins Academy is interested in keeping the public educated on the paddlefish project.

"We're bringing schools and students together to see how human interaction can be positive for the environment," she said, adding the radios and telemetry antennas embedded in the paddlefish created learning opportunities for students in the classroom. "Students are able to name their fish and track them. They can look for their fish and see where they go. We ask them higher-level thinking questions such

as 'Why do paddlefish collect in certain locations?'

That particular question was one officials have been trying to answer after the paddlefish were released in 2014.

Horton said researchers found the fish were collecting at the base of the dam at Lake O' the Pines because that's where water flowed the most.

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