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Basic Facts about Channel Catfish

What's in a Name?

The scientific name for a Channel catfish is *Ictalurus punctatus*.

Ictalurus, Greek for fishcat; *punctatus*, Latin for spotted.

Identification

Channel catfish have a long, slender body with a forked tail. Coloration can be variable ranging from grey/silver to black, with green/blue tints. Distinct black spots appear on the lateral surface, although they tend to disappear or become less prominent in older fish. The upper jaw protrudes beyond the lower jaw. Adult channel catfish are typically range from 18 to 30 inches in length.



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Diet

Their food includes a wide range of items including fish, crayfish, invertebrates, and plant material.

Population

Channel catfish are native to Illinois and are found throughout the Chicago Region in rivers and larger creeks. They also occur in Lake Michigan. The population, once severely limited by water pollution and habitat destruction, is rebounding as area waterways improve.

Behavior

Channel catfish are highly migratory. During warmer months they can be wide ranging, moving generally upstream especially during high water events when they often move into smaller streams and tributaries. During the fall season they move downstream and overwinter in large congregations in deeper pools.

Reproduction

Channel catfish become sexually mature at three to four years of age. Spawning occurs in late spring and summer. Males select secluded sites, like hollow logs, and construct nests in these safe cavities. The eggs are deposited by the female and males guard the nests and provide care for eggs and young larvae until they are able to leave the nest, about one week after hatching.

Project Statement

On Tuesday, June 10 Friends of the Chicago River and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) released 30,000 one year old channel catfish into the Chicago River system as the first step in a spawning habitat restoration project funded by a \$300,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Chi-Cal Rivers Fund.

Project FAQs

1. Why is the Channel catfish release happening now? Is the Chicago River clean enough?

IDNR fisheries has been working for many years to improve fishing opportunities in the Chicago Urban Area (e.g. Urban Fishing Program). Until recently, their efforts were limited to Lake Michigan and local ponds and lagoons. Over time, conditions such as water quality have improved significantly in the Chicago River due to the work of Friends of the Chicago River. As a result, IDNR efforts have shifted focus to the Chicago River, which many anglers have already discovered. As a corollary, IDNR fisheries has been an active partner in Friends of the Chicago River's successful push to update water quality regulations on the Chicago River to ensure that the water and habitat in the river keeps improving.

2. Are there other actions taking place besides the fish release?

Although water quality has improved, habitat remains a limiting factor in many areas. Fisheries staff has participated in habitat committees and worked directly with the Friends of the Chicago River to identify habitat projects. The Chicago River channel catfish habitat improvement project and channel catfish stocking is part of the expanded urban fisheries effort.

3. Why the Channel catfish and not another species?

Electrofishing surveys indicated that Channel catfish were present in the Chicago River, but in very low abundance. Since they are one of the more popular sport species and are more tolerant than many other game species, IDNR suggested focusing on channel catfish and trying to improve their abundance by introducing spawning habitat. Channel catfish spawn in cavities, and that habitat can be easily mimicked, as demonstrated in fish hatcheries. IDNR fisheries staff proposed a channel catfish spawning habitat design and placement locations, which became part of a larger grant proposal. Fisheries staff also recommended stocking channel catfish fingerlings to increase the potential spawning population.

4. Why is this project important and exciting?

The project is important for several reasons: Providing additional angling opportunities in the urban areas is a top priority for IDNR. Urban youth need additional outdoor recreational activities. Moreover, there has been a massive public investment in improving water quality in the River. This project will help to get a return on that investment. This project is also exciting in that it recognizes, in a public way, that the Chicago River has improved significantly. Considering the long history of degraded conditions, it is a remarkable achievement. Much work remains, but this project represents an exciting turning point.

5. Are the fish safe to eat?

Contamination of fish flesh is a problem in many waterbodies throughout the state. The level of contamination is routinely monitored and appropriate consumption advisories are published by the Illinois Department of Public Health. Currently there are consumption advisories for several species in waterways throughout the state. Channel catfish in the Chicago River will be monitored as they grow and appropriate advisories will be established as necessary. People purchasing a fishing license are notified of any advisories.