

Razorback sucker

(*Xyrauchen texanus*)—Endangered

Description

Adult razorback suckers may reach lengths of over 2 feet and weigh up to 10 pounds. This fish has a large head somewhat compressed. The head constitutes up to one fourth of the total length. Its eyes are small and longitudinally oval. It has a large mouth, and distinctive hump on its back. The dorsal (back) fin is long and low, and it has a large, powerful caudal (tail) fin. The fish's upper surface is a dull slate color, its belly is white, and its throat is yellow.

Distribution and Habitat

The razorback sucker was once widely distributed throughout the large river portions of the Colorado River and its tributaries. In the upper basin it was present in the Green River to Green River, Wyoming, in the Colorado River to below Rifle, Colorado, and in the lower reaches of the major tributaries such as the Yampa and Gunnison Rivers.

Present distribution in the upper basin is much the same as it was

in the past, except that it is generally absent from Flaming Gorge Reservoir and the cold tailwaters below the dam down to the mouth of the Yampa River. Habitats which are still important for the razorback sucker include the following river segments:

Green River—confluence with Yampa to confluence with Colorado River.

Yampa River—Lily, Colorado, to confluence with Green River.

White River—immediate vicinity of the confluence with the Green River.

Colorado River—Rifle, Colorado, to Lake Powell.

Gunnison River—Delta, Colorado, to confluence with Colorado River.

Razorback suckers are generally found in backwater areas or areas of very slow current. They have been collected in faster water, and some have considered them inhabitants of the main channels. Young are seldom collected, but probably seek out eddies, pools, and other slow water near shore. In the upper Colorado River basin,

the razorback is restricted to the lower zone and the lower portions of the intermediate zone. They are seldom found in larger tributaries and have never been reported from smaller streams. For example, they are found only in the lower Yampa River, well below the upstream limit of Colorado squawfish. The razorback sucker appears to grow well in warm reservoirs, but though spawning has been observed, no successful reproduction is known from reservoirs.

Life History

Spawning has been observed several times in the lower basin reservoirs along shorelines where wave action causes currents. Spawning occurred in March at water temperatures of 60-68 degrees F. During spawning male breeding coloration is black to a point about 1 inch below the lateral line, with a brilliant orange extending ventrally from this point.

In its natural habitat, the razorback is a bottom feeder, sucking up plant and animal material along with mud. In reservoirs and perhaps at times in riverine situations, plankton (especially crustaceans) are consumed. It appears that the razorback can feed on the bottom and in the open water. The diet of larval suckers is not known. However, larval fish fed a diet of strained beef liver, baby food, and zooplankton under artificial propagation conditions at Willow Beach National Fish Hatchery exhibited good growth.

Threats and Reasons for Decline

Razorback suckers were abundant during the late 1800's and early 1900's and were harvested as a



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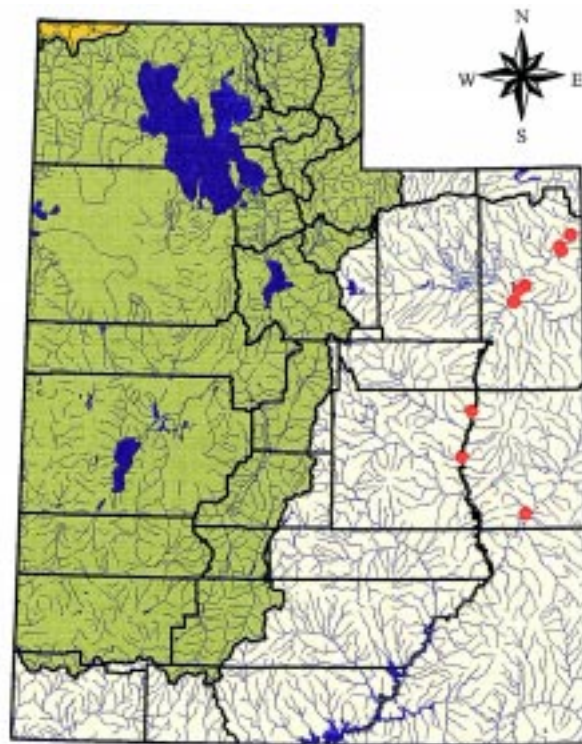
commercial species in large quantities. These harvests contributed to long-term population declines. However, beginning in the early part of the 20th century, a more precipitous decline appears to have begun. Changes in stream flow and water temperatures, direct loss of habitat due to inundation by reservoirs, blockage of migration routes and the introduction of non-native fish species are primarily responsible for the decline of the razorback sucker. Today the razorback sucker is rare in collections in all but a very few locations. Evidence of reproduction is lacking in some areas where it was previously common.

Recovery Efforts

The razorback sucker was listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1991. The Colorado River System Endangered Fish Recovery Program agreement, signed in January 1988, includes five basic steps to aid in the recovery of this and other Colorado River system fish species. These steps include:

1. Provision of instream flows
2. Habitat development and maintenance
3. Native fish stocking
4. Management of non-native fish species and sport fishing
5. Research, monitoring, and data management

The goal of this program is to maintain and protect self-sustaining populations and sufficient natural habitat to sustain these populations. This program should be beneficial to other endangered fish species sharing this habitat, including bonytail chub, Colorado squawfish, and humpback chub.



Razorback Sucker distribution.



References

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