Endangered fish stocking programs in San Juan and Upper Colorado River basins show success

Hatchery-produced, genetically diverse stocked fishes are the basis of re-establishing naturally self-sustaining populations of Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker in the San Juan River, and of bonytail and razorback sucker in the Upper Colorado River system. The San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program (San Juan Program) and the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program (Upper Colorado Program) both implemented new stocking plans in 2003 to expedite re-establishment of wild populations and to achieve the demographic criteria required in recovery goals developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The recovery programs monitor survival and reproduction of stocked fish to evaluate and improve stocking strategies.

In the San Juan River

The San Juan River originates in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado and flows over 220 miles from Navajo Dam in northwestern New Mexico to Lake Powell in southeastern Utah. Razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow historically occurred in the San Juan River, but much of the river has been designated critical habitat for these endangered fish species. From the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, the San Juan Program conducted experimental stocking efforts to supplement remaining numbers of wild or captive-reared Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker in the San Juan River. During this experimental period, large numbers of juvenile and larval fishes were stocked. Data revealed that hatchery-reared fishes could survive, spawn and produce larval suckers, demonstrating that stocking was a feasible means to increase the numbers and range of these endangered fishes. Formal stocking plans were then developed to meet the sustainable population sizes set forth in the recovery goals.

To meet the goals, the San Juan Program works closely with Dexter National Fish Hatchery and Technology Center (Dexter) in New Mexico and Uvalde National Fish Hatchery (Uvalde) in Texas. For Colorado pikeminnow, the stocking plan calls for 1,000 fishes at least 1 year old and 100,000 fishes less than 1 year old to be stocked each year in the San Juan River. Dexter fulfills the annual stocking goals for Colorado pikeminnow. To date, more than 2.6 million Colorado pikeminnow have been stocked.

For razorback sucker, the stocking plan calls for 11,400 fishes at least 12 inches long to be stocked annually. Dexter produces razorback sucker larval and juveniles long enough to fish to Uvalde to meet production requirements. Uvalde raises them to at least 12 inches then stocks them in the San Juan River. Dexter retains an additional 10,500 razorback sucker at the hatchery. When these fishes reach about 8 inches, they are transferred to Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI) ponds on the Navajo Nation in northwest New Mexico. When they reach 12 inches in size, they are stocked in the river to supplement the fishes from Uvalde. To date, more than 58,000 razorback sucker have been stocked in the San Juan River.

In the Upper Colorado River Basin

The Upper Colorado River Basin includes the Upper Colorado and Green rivers and their tributaries which flow throughout western Colorado, eastern Utah and southwest Wyoming. The Upper Basin was historically home to the humpback chub, bonytail, razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow. Many Upper Basin river sections have been designated critical habitat for these endangered fish species.

The hatchery-rearing and stocking program for razorback sucker and bonytail in the Upper Basin has evolved over the past 15 years, based initially on research needs and later on needs to raise and stock the endangered fishes. Initially, hatcheries were designed to maintain broodstock to create future generations of genetically sound fish. In the mid-1990s hatchery increased operations to produce various sizes of razorback sucker and bonytail for experimental and stocking plans. The stocking plan was implemented in 2003.

For razorback sucker, the stocking plan calls for nearly 30,000 fishes, 12 inches or larger, to be stocked annually. They are produced at the Grand Valley Endangered Fish Facility in Grand Junction, Colorado, and the Ouray National Fish Hatchery in Vernal, Utah. Since 2003, about 137,000 razorback sucker have been stocked in the Colorado, Gunnison and Green rivers.

In spring 2009, researchers from Colorado State University’s Larval Fish Laboratory captured a 17-inch, 1.7 pound, 7-year-old adult razorback sucker in the Yampa River near Lily Park, about seven miles upstream of Dinosaur National Monument in northwest Colorado. The fish was released into the Yampa River, and subsequent monitoring continues.

Colorado pikeminnow count, p. 6

Estimating populations helps biologists gain a better understanding of fishes.
Ute Tribe takes a lead role to manage nonnative fishes in Green River and its tributaries

The future looks brighter for endangered fishes in the Green River system due to efforts of the Dine-Ihankti Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation. The tribe is working with the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program to reduce nonnative fish populations in this river system that is considered vital to recovery of the endangered fishes.

The Green River is home to one of the six remaining populations of humpback chub and the largest populations of Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker. One of the fish reported concentrations of bonytail was found in the Green River within Dinosaur National Monument.

Sections of the Green River and two of its tributaries, the Duchesne and White rivers, flow through lands owned and managed by the tribe. Tribally access to these river sections is critical to Recovery Program efforts to reduce nonnative fish populations in the Green River system.

“Smallmouth bass is the nonnative fish species of greatest concern in sections of the Green and Duchesne rivers where tribal lands are located,” said Recovery Program Director Tom Chart. “Increased numbers of this fish threaten the survival of endangered and other native fishes. The tribe’s assistance with nonnative fish management provides an important boost to our overall effort to reduce populations of this problematic species in the entire Green River system.”

Since the late 1990s, the tribe has worked with the Recovery Program on a variety of projects to benefit the endangered fishes. These include conducting research to help prepare flow recommendations for the Duchesne River, helping to implement the flow recommendations, and co-operating with the Recovery Program to screen an outlet at the tribe’s Bottle Hollow Reservoir to prevent nonnative fishes from entering the Duchesne River.

In 2004, the tribe received a grant through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (Service) Tribal Landowners Incentive Program. The grant was used, in part, to develop a native fish management plan that includes nonnative fish management as one of the elements needed to maintain healthy native fish populations.

The tribe’s concern with increased numbers of nonnative smallmouth bass in river sections within tributary areas led to submission of a proposal to the Recovery Program to work together to conduct nonnative fish management efforts.

The tribe has always felt that it is important to respect and preserve all native species that occupy this earth,” said the Tribe Fish and Wildlife Department’s Director Carlos Reed. “We are responsible for managing sensitive, threatened and endangered fish species that occupy tribal lands. We understood that the federal government had a successful program in place for this specific resource management, so it made sense to develop a relationship.”

For the past two years, the tribe has led the effort to remove smallmouth bass and gather data on native fish populations in sections of critical habitat in the Green River and its tributaries, in cooperation with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) and the Service.

In 2008, work took place on the Green River through Desolation and Gray canyons. In 2009, efforts focused on tributaries of the Duchesne River where, from May through October, biologists used a variety of electrofishing methods to net fish and collect data. A small amount of the data collected in the water temporarily stun fish and causes them to rise to the water’s surface where biologists can net them and gather data. This work occurred during both high and low flows. An electrofishing barge helped biologists reach river sections previously inaccessible during low flows.

Although biologists reported few captures of endangered fishes, the numbers of adult and juvenile smallmouth bass captured were high enough to warrant repeating this effort in 2010. Work will expand to include smallmouth bass removal and native fish monitoring on the White River.

“The tribe has always felt that it is important to respect and preserve all native species that occupy this earth,” said the Tribe Fish and Wildlife Department’s Director Carlos Reed. “We are responsible for managing sensitive, threatened and endangered fish species that occupy tribal lands. We understood that the federal government had a successful program in place for this specific resource management, so it made sense to develop a relationship.”

For the past two years, the tribe has led the effort to remove smallmouth bass and gather data on native fish populations in sections of critical habitat in the Green River and its tributaries, in cooperation with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) and the Service.

In 2008, work took place on the Green River through Desolation and Gray canyons. In 2009, efforts focused on tributaries of the Duchesne River where, from May through October, biologists used a variety of electrofishing methods to net fish and collect data. A small amount of the data collected in the water temporarily stun fish and causes them to rise to the water’s surface where biologists can net them and gather data. This work occurred during both high and low flows. An electrofishing barge helped biologists reach river sections previously inaccessible during low flows.

Although biologists reported few captures of endangered fishes, the numbers of adult and juvenile smallmouth bass captured were high enough to warrant repeating this effort in 2010. Work will expand to include smallmouth bass removal and native fish monitoring on the White River.

“This is the first time that the tribe has pursued a project of this magnitude,” said Tribal Biologist Jay Groves. “We have two full-time biologist and four seasonals available to conduct the work.

“We appreciate the cooperation and assistance the tribe received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources,” he said. “Biologists Matt Brown with UDWR, and Mark Fuller with the Service, provided training and helped recovery this work. On our own, we do not have the resources to undertake a project of this size.”

“Congratulations to the Upper Colorado River Fishery Project Leader Dave Irving has developed high respect for the Ute Tribe during his many years of working with tribal members on a variety of projects.

“Exciting to see the tribe expand its resources to include endangered fish recovery,” he said. “This tribe allowed the Service to fulfill some of our trust responsibilities to help them identify methods and equipment needed to conduct this kind of work. At the same time, the tribe is helping the Recovery Program remove nonnative fishes in some of the most important river reaches to the endangered fishes in the Upper Colorado River Basin.”

For more information, contact Jay Groves, 435-722-5511, ext. 4816, jgrove@utah.com.
Stocking programs show success continued from page 1

Project leader named for Colorado River Fishery Project Office

Michelle Shaghayeghi brings enthusiasm and a broad range of experience with endangered species issues to the new role she assumed in September as project leader of the Colorado River Fishery Project Office in Grand Junction, Colo. In this position, she helps develop and implement research efforts and recovery actions for the endangered fishes.

Michelle’s U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) career began in the Ecological Services Programs’ Endangered Species Contaminants Program at the Carlshound Field Office in southern California. She later moved to the Endangered Species Program where she drafted recovery plans and worked with federal agencies on consultations and with private landowners to develop conservation bank agreements and habitat conservation plans.

Most recently, Michelle was the chief for the Branch of Recovery and Delisting in the Service’s office in Washington, D.C., where she worked on budget recommendations, drafted regulations and policy, and processed regulatory documents associated with listed species.

Michelle served as project leader in the Colorado River Fishery Project offices in Vernal, Utah, in late 2006 and in Grand Junction in the spring of 2009, as part of the Service’s advanced leadership management program. These assignments gave her a better understanding of the recovery programs.

“After working on recovery of listed species at the national level for the past several years, I am excited to get back into the field and apply my endangered species knowledge to implementing recovery on the ground for the endangered fishes in the Upper Colorado and San Juan rivers,” Michelle said.

Michelle earned a bachelor’s degree in zoology and completed several years of graduate work toward a master’s degree in biology from California Polytechnic University in Pomona.

She can be reached at 970-245-9319, ext. 19, michelle._shaghayeghi@fws.gov.

Editor’s note: Portrait project leader Chuck McMilin in March 2009 after a 31-year career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A post Recovery Program year of the one, Chuck made significant contributions toward understanding the life history of the roundtail and establishing management actions to help more them. We wish him well.

Stocking programs aim to reach demographic targets in recovery goals

The San Juan and Upper Colorado recovery programs rely on recovery goals to develop and implement management actions and measure success as they work to recover endangered fishes. The recovery goals provide objective, measurable criteria for downlisting to “threatened” and delisting (removal from endangered Species Act protection).

In addition to achieving certain demographic criteria, other threats to the species must be minimized before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will consider changing the status of the fish. The recovery goals describe actions to remove these threats. For more information, contact Tom Capla, 303-969-7322, ext. 228, tom.capla@fws.gov.

Grand Canyon humpback chub fare better than Upper Basin populations through recent drought

Six populations of humpback chub are known to exist—one in the Colorado River system’s Upper Colorado River basin. Adult endangered humpback chub in Grand Canyon, Ariz., increased by about 50 percent between 2000 and 2008, according to analysis conducted in early 2009 by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The upward trend reversed in the Lower Colorado River in 1989 to 2001. The estimated number of adult humpback chub in the Grand Canyon population is between 6,000 and 10,000, with the most likely number being 7,650 individuals. Several natural and human-caused changes took place in the Colorado River in 2008 that may have caused the rebound.

• The experimental removal of large numbers of rainbow trout from the area near the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers may have benefited the brown trout that prey on young fishes and compete with humpback chub for food.
• Native fishes, including roundtail chub, are thought to have benefited from drought-induced warming beginning in 2003. In 2005, water temperatures in the mainstream Colorado River near the Little Colorado River were a record 2 degrees Farenheit since Lake Powell filled in 1980.
• A series of experimental releases from hatchery ponds in 2007 and 2008 that may have benefited humpback chub and other native fishes.


Upper Basin humpback chub populations

The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program is working to recover five humpback chub populations in the Upper Basin. Current population estimates are:

- About 3,000 adults occur in the Black Rocks and Westwater Canyon populations. In late 2008, Black Rocks shows recent declines.
- The Desolation/Gray Canyon population in the Green River has been declining.
- Populations in the Yampa and Cataract rivers are estimated at 29 adults, consisting of up to a few hundred adults.
- Recent studies show that humpback chub populations are stable or declining. The Desolation/Gray and Yampa canyon populations have declined to the point that captives at a hatchery is necessary.
- Preliminary data showing a downward trend in these populations is reason for concern,” said Recovery Program Propagation Coordinator Tom Capla. “We are working to confirm the data, but the trends appear to be accurate. We need to identify the cause and take the appropriate actions to reverse that trend.”

Downward trends in some humpback chub populations have been attributed to temperature changes, nonnative fishes and habitat changes associated with dry weather and low river flows.

Can humpback chub be raised successfully in a hatchery?

Biologist Kim Brininger of the National Fish Hatchery in Ouray, Utah, has been working to confirm how many of the collected fishes are humpback chub versus another chub species, the roundtail chub. Tom said. “The hatcheries will keep the humpback chub as a safety measure to see if broodstock should there be a need to raise and stock them in the future.”

The recovery program’s hope that humpback chub populations will rally in response to the program’s efforts to manage spring and summer flows and to control nonnative fishes,” Tom said. “Flows throughout the basin in 2008 and 2009 have been higher, and we are seeing some encouraging signs for the humpback chub in the Yampa and Cataract canyons.”

For more information, contact Tom Capla, 303-969-7322, ext. 228, tom.capla@fws.gov.
The Navajo Nation and State of New Mexico celebrate San Juan River water rights settlement

—by John Loper, Ph.D., P.E., Manager, Water Management Branch, Navajo Nation Department of Water Resource, and Member, San Juan Program Coordination Committee

The Navajo Nation and the State of New Mexico celebrated the historic San Juan River water rights settlement at a special event held May 26, 2009, hosted by the Navajo Nation Water Rights Committee on the banks of the San Juan River at the Nenahnezad Chapter House.

This location, near the site of the San Juan Generating Station weir, is significant to the settlement. A few years ago, the San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program remediated this weir with a fish pass to expand the habitat of the endangered Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker as part of the recovery effort for the two species. This location is also where the San Juan River Water Supply Project will divert water from the San Juan River to tens of thousands of Navajos between the San Juan River and the City of Gallup. The San Juan Program provided Endangered Species Act compliance for the project.

At the ceremony, Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley stated, “It is a time to celebrate. The settlement has been a long time coming, and it didn’t start with my administration. There were other presidents, other leaders who worked on this to bring it to fruition.”

Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, who introduced the Omnibus legislation, said, "This is the culmination of a lot of work." He later noted, "It is also the beginning of a lot more work." New Mexico State Engineer John D'Antonio addressed the crowd of more than 200, thanking numerous people who had made important contributions. The Navajo Nation Resources Committee Chairman George Arthur also addressed the crowd. He thanked the Congressional delegation for its hard work, and reminded them of the longstanding water development needs of the Navajo people. His committee played a central role in developing the settlement concepts. Also in attendance was Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Mike Connor who played a major role in drafting the legislation that was successfully incorporated into the Omnibus Act.

After nearly two decades of work, the Navajo Nation executed the settlement agreement with the state of New Mexico in April 2005. President Clinton signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act (Public Law 111-11) in March 2009, which authorized the implementation of the settlement.

The settlement provides a guarantee of more than 600,000 acre-feet of water for the Navajo Nation from the San Juan River. The Act also authorizes the construction of the $870 million San Juan Salt Water Supply Project, the development of conjunctive groundwater wells and rehabilitation of the Navajo irrigation projects along the San Juan River. The settlement also helps to protect the existing water users in the basin.

For more information, contact John Loper, (928) 729-4004, johnloper@navajo.org.

Reservoir operators coordinate releases for endangered fish

Upper Colorado River Basin reservoir operators voluntarily participated this year in the Coordinated Reservoir Operations (CROS) program. Under CROS, reservoir operators release water when runoff conditions permit, to improve endangered fish survival after reservoir yields. They may also contribute water for late-summer, base-flow augmentation.

Combined releases in 2009 of 42,785 acre-feet were the highest since the program was established in 1997, compared with the average of 26,000 acre-feet. Participating reservoirs in 2009 were: Dillon, Green Mountain, Ruedi, Williams Fork, Willow Creek, Windy Gap and Wolford Mountain.

For information: Kara Lamb, 970-926-4366, klamb@bendix.com

Recovery Program news and updates

San Juan Program updates Web site and database


For information: Scott Durst, 505-766-4279, scott_durst@fws.gov.

Muth named director of Bozeman Fish Technology Center

After nine years as the Upper Colorado Program’s director, Bob Muth became the director of the Bozeman Fish Technology Center in Montana.

"While with the Recovery Program, it was rewarding to see the cooperation and dedication of so many individuals and organizations," Bob said. "I believe that species conservation can be achieved only through this type of cooperation. I offer my thanks to each individual for his or her commitment to this important effort."

Bob’s work on behalf of the program is deeply appreciated and he is wished success in the future. He can be reached at 406-994-9900, robert_muth@fws.gov.

Clifton Sanitation hosts aquarium exhibit

Clifton Sanitation District (Clifton) established an educational exhibit with an aquarium that features razorback sucker provided by the Grand Valley Endangered Fish Facility.

Clifton provides wastewater service to customers in western Colorado. The facility recently underwent a multi-million dollar expansion and is developing a wetland area for wildlife. The Grand Valley facility offered suggestions for a pond design that may potentially be used as a growout site for razorback sucker.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had a significant role in making this exhibit possible.

For information: Logan Poison, 970-834-7422, ext. 502, lpoisson@cliftonsanitation.com.

Clifton Sanitation

Recovery Program news and updates

Burdick named outstanding researcher of the year

U Nited Fish and Wildlife Service Biologist Bob Burdick is the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program’s Outstanding Researcher of the Year. Bob has worked with the endangered Colorado River fishes for his entire 10-year career. After earning a graduate degree in Wildlife Science from Utah State University, Bob became one of the first biologists with the Colorado River Fishery Project (CRLF) in Vernal, Utah, where his work included surveying fish populations in 435 miles of the Green and Yampa rivers.

In 1982, Bob transferred to the Grand Junction, Colo., CRLF office where he is a senior staff fish biologist. He is actively involved with conducting and evaluating nominative fish management actions in more than 110 miles of the Upper Colorado and Lower Gunnison rivers. Bob oversees operation of fish passages on the Colorado and Gunnison rivers. He also ensures that all station field equipment is maintained, including electrofishing boats and rafts.

"Bob’s research contributions are extensive," said Pat Martinez, Colorado Division of Wildlife biologist and past researcher of the year, who presented the award at the annual Upper Basin Researchers meeting in Grand Junction in January. "Bob performed the initial evaluation to determine the feasibility of using PIT tags to mark endangered fishes, validated minimum stream flows for the Lower Gunnison River, and developed a stocking plan for razorback sucker in the Upper Colorado and Gunnison rivers. He assessed post-stocking survival and distribution for hatchery-raised razorback sucker, surveyed fish populations in the Gunnison River and conducted a floodplain and bankside inventory of the Upper Colorado and Gunnison rivers. He also presented and published a surgical procedure to implant fish with radio transmitters at the International Symposium on Bio telemetry.

"Bob is a gregarious, jack-of-all-trades, with the mechanical aptitude to procure, maintain and deploy equipment," Pat said. "He’s the go-to guy for emergencies, repairs, spare parts, or for research."

Bob expressed deep appreciation for the award. “This award is a validation that my participation, involvement and contributions toward protecting these four big-river fishes are appreciated and have been worthwhile," he said. "I do not exactly see myself as a true researcher but more of a hoots and waders type of biologist! When I think of the past award recipients, I am honored and extremely pleased that you believe my contributions deserve recognition along with theirs. These native fishes need devoted advocates like yourselves if they stand a chance of surviving."
I want to thank all who have contacted me to offer warm words of welcome during my recent transition from the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program’s nominative fish coordinator to the role of program director. It means a lot to hear your support and it was fun to catch up with many of you.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor, Dr. Robert Meith, for all he did for the Upper Colorado Program during the past nine years. Bob’s background was rooted in research of the Colorado River fishes. He devoted much of his career to the study of the ecology and early life history of many of our endangered species. Among his many accomplishments, Bob led a team of researchers to develop flow and temperature recommendations for the Green River below Flaming Gorge Dam.

Under Bob’s supervision, relationships were fostered between the Upper Colorado Program and local water user groups resulting in a high level of cooperation to deliver the flows needed to help recover the endangered fishes. Although Bob did many things during his tenure with the Recovery Program, in a nutshell he promoted strong science as the cornerstone for sound programmatic decision-making and he will be greatly missed. I wish Bob and his wife, Susan, the best as they begin their new life in Bozeman, Mont. (see “News and Updates” on page 4).

I believe in the recovery programs’ cooperative approach to endangered species conservation. Before moving to Colorado, I was an endangered species biologist in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Utah Ecological Services Field Station where I worked with biologists dedicated to beneficiating the natural resource through the biological opinions they wrote. A common misperception was to think cooperation from multiple interest groups and project proponents and then write forward-looking programmatic documents which were more protective of the ecosystem.

The Upper Colorado and San Juan recovery programs capitalized on this approach long ago by bringing stakeholders to the table, by identifying threats to the endangered fishes and actions to reduce those threats, and by securing funding to implement those actions. This simple construct is hard to beat when it comes to the complex task of recovering endangered big-river fishes.

The recovery programs have established a level of trust among their stakeholders that gives the programs the flexibility within their own projects to provide the flows necessary to secure important habitats for the fishes.

Nevertheless, for the last two years, Steve Cranney decided to try a different profession. Steve was one of Utah’s principle fisheries biologists researching the endangered Colorado pikeminnow and other native fishes in the Upper Colorado River and other southwestern river systems. Before that, he was a fisheries biologist for the Bureau of Reclamation’s Upper Colorado River systems. Before that, he was a fisheries biologist for the Bureau of Reclamation.

I was there the day they tested a future yearling program involving a series of hidden sand and gravel bars. “Steve and his crew stole their wives’ hearts,” said Ron Guertin, regional director, Mountain-Prairie Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and chairman of the Upper Colorado Program’s Implementation Committee. “He is highly respected and well known for his professional and cooperative work with partners within the Colorado River Basin to recover the endangered fishes.”

Endangered fish recovery requires an unfaltering commitment from all of its partners. This commitment was demonstrated this year with partners working together to extend the Upper Colorado Program’s cooperative agreement through 2023 (see related article on page 2). Non-federal program partners worked with members of Congress to increase capital funding through 2023 through passage of Public Law 111-11 on March 10, 2009. As the newsletter goes to press, they are working to secure annual funding through HR 2288 and S. 1453, which is important to keep the programs moving forward.

In closing, I am excited to work with the many interesting and dedicated people involved with the recovery programs, including my counterpart with the San Juan Program, Dave Campbell. We both appreciate the hard work and dedication of program partners, staff, volunteers and many others whose efforts continue to lead to our success. I look forward to working with the many partners and stakeholders to make this year another successful one, raising the bar even further on the path to recovery.

Tom Chart named director for Upper Colorado Program

Steve Cranney returns to the Green River

Someone told Steve Cranney he would be working as a summer seasonal 13 years after hiring on with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), he might have decided to try a different profession. Nevertheless, for the last two years, Steve has been working as a technician for the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program.

“Steve Cranney came to work for me the summer of 2008 as a field technician,” said Leisa Mouser, native fish biologist, UDWR. “He has been invaluable out in the field. Steve brings many years of fisheries knowledge with him and this has helped us immensely when dealing with problems or issues we encounter on a daily basis on the Green River.

“He knows the river and the history of the various projects,” Leisa said. “He also knows how the river used to be, when there were many more young-of-the-year Colorado pikeminnow and fewer nonnative fishes present.”

Steve was one of Utah’s principle biologists researching the endangered fish of the Green River during the 80’s and early 90’s. “The challenges then were different than those today because there was almost no information on the fishes, their numbers, habitat preference and life histories,” said Ron Stewart, UDWR conservation outreach manager. “They also had to overcome the challenges the river presented. How do you study fish in a muddy river, which floods its banks in the spring and becomes a series of hidden sand and gravel bars in the summer?”

“I was there the day they tested one new technique,” Ron said. “Steve and his crew stole their wives’ colanders (salad spinners) and bolted them together to form a couple of spheres. When they hooked them up to the generator, everything seemed to work — except, of course, the river. Their makeshift electrical spheres sank in a tub of water but floated when dropped into the muddy, flowing waters of the Green River. It took a bit of trial and error to get the size of the balls just right but when they did, they had found a much better delivery system for their electroshocking team.”

Steve still brings his enthusiasm to work.

“His knowledge of the river, the projects, his professionalism and enthusiasm has been invaluable,” said Trina Hedrick, UDWR native aquatics project leader.

“Steve comes to work every day with a positive attitude and his willingness to work helps motivate the other staff,” Leisa said. “I am glad he came out of retirement to help with our various projects. The knowledge he has has been beneficial to the other biologists. He makes every day out on the river an enjoyable one!”

Helping to raise the bar even further on the path to recovery.

About 75 children, ages 4-12, and their families participated in the Fremont Springs Hatchery’s Kids Fishing Day in August 2009. Sponsored by the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, the event provided an opportunity for San Juan River Basin recovery implementation programs to reach out to citizens of the future and educate them about endangered species, particularly the Razorback Sucker and Colorado Pikeminnow which live in the San Juan River. The San Juan Program plans to participate in this event again next year.

Program director’s message

By Tom Chart, Program Director

Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program

Children learn about endangered fishes at Kids Fishing Day
Population estimates help biologists gain better understanding of Colorado pikeminnow

In memory

Pat Nelson – 1948-2009
Pat served in the U.S. Air Force and was an avid hiker, fisherman, adventurer and world traveler. His passion was to tour primitive areas all over the world including Africa, Nepal, Tahiti, China, Mexico and South America.
To honor Pat’s memory, a memorial bench featuring a silhouette of the Colorado pikeminnow was placed at Walter Walker State Wildlife Area along the Colorado River in Grand Junction, Colo., one of the many places where Pat worked to restore river habitat.

For more information, contact Tom Czapla, 303-969-7312, ext. 228, tom_czapla@fws.gov.