# Management Brief

## West Virginia Division of Natural Resources
## Wildlife Resources Section

# OHIO RIVER CATFISH ASSESSMENT

## BACKGROUND

In 2008, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (DNR) began a multi-year study of blue and flathead catfish on Ohio River to determine the potential for a trophy fishery. During the spring, summer, and fall, catfish were collected using electrofishing boats at four Ohio River tailwaters: Willow Island, Belleville, Racine, and R.C. Byrd. Fish were measured for length and tagged with t-bar anchor tags to determine movement. In addition, biologist measured catfish at selected tournaments along Ohio River. These data are being used to determine distribution, movement, and size structure of blue and flathead catfish, and to determine the catch-rate and size structure of catfish being caught by tournament anglers.

## RESULTS

One blue catfish and 628 flathead catfish were collected during electrofishing surveys. The blue catfish was collected at R.C. Byrd tailwater and was 19-inches. Flathead catfish ranged in size from 3 to 44-inches and averaged 17-inches. On average, larger flathead catfish were collected during the spring and at the Belleville tailwater. R.C. Byrd had the smallest average size of flathead catfish, but had nearly double the catch-rate (48 fish/hour) of the other tailwaters. Less than 1% of flathead fish collected during electrofishing surveys were of trophy size (≥ 40-inches) and about 3% were of memorable size (34 to 39-inches).

Three hundred and forty-nine flathead catfish were tagged. Tagging indicated that flathead catfish moved very little and generally stayed within a small area of the river. In 2008, 5 percent of the tagged-fish were recovered during electrofishing surveys. All were collected at the tailwater where originally tagged. Anglers reported catching an additional six tagged catfish. These were all caught at the tailwater where they were originally tagged and all were released at the site.

Six Ohio River catfish tournaments were visited by DNR staff from June through September. Tournaments ranged in size from 25 to 216 participants. Of the 311 catfish weighed in at the six tournaments, 58% were channel, 40% flathead, and 1% blue catfish. Average length of flathead catfish was 26 inches and maximum was 41 inches. Only 2% of flathead catfish caught in the 2008 tournaments were of trophy size (≥ 40-inches), while 14% were considered memorable size (34 to 39-inches).

# CONCLUSION

Flathead catfish were common in electrofishing surveys and catfish tournaments, but large specimens (≥ 40-inches) were uncommon. Blue catfish were rare, but tournament anglers reported blue catfish smaller than the current 18-inch minimum length limit.

# FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Blue catfish will continue to be stocked into Ohio River pool to establish a sport fishery. In 2009, catchable blue catfish will be stocked following tagging. The same four tailwater areas will be surveyed using electrofishing boats in 2009. In addition, surveys will be conducted in the R.C. Byrd pool. Fish will be tagged as in 2008 and anglers are encouraged to report any tagged fish. In addition, DNR also will visit selected catfish tournaments to collect length and catch data.

| Results of Ohio River Electrofishing Surveys for Flathead Catfish | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tailwater | Number Encountered | Range of Total Length (inches) | Catch Rate (No./hr) |
| Belleville | 174 | 1 - 44 | 27 |
| Racine | 137 | 3 - 43 | 15 |
| R.C. Byrd | 240 | 3 – 44 | 48 |
| Willow Island | 80 | 3 - 44 | 25 |

| Results of Ohio River Tagging Study for Flathead Catfish | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tailwater | Number Tagged | Number Recaptured | Percent Recaptured | Range of Total Length (inches) |
| Belleville | 118 | 5 | 4 | 10 – 43 |
| Racine | 77 | 2 | 3 | 10 - 35 |
| R.C. Byrd | 89 | 8 | 9 | 10 – 43 |
| Willow Island | 65 | 4 | 6 | 10 – 43 |
| Total | 349 | 19 | 5 | |

**A 25-pound flathead catfish collected during DNR electrofishing survey.**



**DNR biologists conducting catfish surveys at R.C. Byrd tailwater using an electrofishing boat and a chase boat.**



*For More Information or Questions*

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