

# PROTECT MARYLAND'S TROPHY BLUE CATFISH, NOW!

by



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# Who are Bay Catfish Advocates (BCAs)?

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- **Over 1,600 and steadily growing** concerned recreational catfish anglers who:
  - Catfish purely for recreation, and in tournaments
  - Are members of catfishing clubs
  - Are catfish guides
  - Own or work at catfishing-related businesses
  - Write, publish, or distribute catfishing-related media.
- Reside in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, as well as **24 other states**, including:
  - Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.
- Visit <http://baycatfish.com/comments.html> for BCA comments!

# Why are BCAs Seeking these Regulations? (Part 1 of 2)

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- Currently, there are **no regulations** that protect Maryland's trophy blue catfish, which **unfairly** places the interests of recreational trophy blue catfish anglers – **a major stakeholder** – in jeopardy.
- The # of recreational anglers who pursue trophy blue catfish in Maryland waters is **noteworthy, and growing**.
- The Potomac River is one of the **top** trophy blue catfish waters in North America.

# Why are BCAs Seeking these Regulations? (Part 2 of 2)

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- Anglers who pursue trophy blue catfish have invested **considerable resources** (e.g., money and time) in the pursuit of their preferred quarry.
  - In nearby Virginia, the James River blue catfish fishery produced \$2.5 million for the local economy during March through November 2002.
    - \$2.5 million equates to \$3.3 million in today's dollars and trophy catfishing is more popular today than it was in 2002!
- The Potomac River's trophy blue catfish are currently **under siege** from those who supply greedy, out-of-state private/for-profit paylake owners with live blue catfish.
  - If not halted, the Potomac River's relatively rare trophy blue catfish will soon be greatly depleted.

# About Many of Today's Paylakes

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- Characterized by **deplorable conditions** that result in the health and well-being of many catfish there diminishing very quickly.
  - Sadly, most “transplanted” catfish **die very early deaths**.
- Owner's use of **chemicals** such as **copper sulfate** to “encourage” their catfish to feed.
  - **Skin lesions** are the unfortunate, tell-tale sign of catfish that were artificially stimulated to feed.
- The questionable notion of out-of-state fish suppliers and paylake owners **profiting** from fish taken from another state's **public** waters, particularly where recreational anglers in that other state covet these fish and have invested considerable resources in pursuit of them.

# What We Have Learned from Virginia (Part 1 of 3)

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- **TROPHY BLUE CATFISH ARE RELATIVELY RARE.**
  - “Fish over 32 inches account for **less than 2%** of blue catfish found in the tidal James River, and **less than 1%** of blue catfish found in our other tidal rivers.”
    - Bob Greenlee, Eastern Regional Aquatic Resources Manager, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
  - A 32 inch fish will likely weigh approximately 13 to 17 pounds.
    - Recreational trophy blue catfish anglers generally pursue fish **over 40 pounds**.
  - It is accurate, then, to deduce that the % of blue catfish of the size that most recreational trophy blue catfish anglers are interested in is even **smaller than 1%** (in tidal rivers in Virginia other than the James) or **smaller than 2%** (in the James River).

# What We Have Learned from Virginia (Part 2 of 3)

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- **DIRECT EVIDENCE PROVING, CONCLUSIVELY, THAT BLUE CATFISH HAVE CAUSED ECOLOGICAL HARM DOES NOT EXIST...REPEAT, DOES NOT EXIST.**
  - “**Circumstantial evidence** suggests blue cats are hurting native white catfish and long-established channel catfish, but I can’t say that about any other species.”
    - Bob Greenlee, Eastern Regional Aquatic Resources Manager, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
  - “Are blue catfish causing ecological harm in the Chesapeake Bay? We have evidence to support that view, but **we can’t prove it.**”
    - Greg Garman, Fish Ecologist, Virginia Commonwealth University

# What We Have Learned from Virginia (Part 3 of 3)

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- **ACCORDING TO JOE SCHMITT, MS (VIRGINIA SEA GRANT FELLOW AT VIRGINIA TECH):**
  - “...the dominant species they [bigger blue catfish] consume is **gizzard shad.**”
  - “Are blue catfish responsible for declines in American shad and river herring? This is highly unlikely...**Predation of American shad and river herring is not common with blue catfish.**”
    - In fact, “It appears that **American shad are capable of recovering in the presence of these big catfish.**”
  - “Neither largemouth or smallmouth bass are native to any of our tidal rivers. They have **no more right** to be here than blue or flathead catfish.”



# Winter Crab Dredge Surveys

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- Since 1990, the average total number of blue crabs in the Bay has been estimated to be approximately 454.2 million.
  - This average has been **exceeded 10 times** since 1990.
  - This average has been **surpassed 3 times since 2010**, to include 2016.
    - The average total number of blue crabs in the Bay, according to the 2016 survey, is estimated to be approximately 553 million.
      - 2016's estimate is approximately **21.8% higher** than the 27-year average.

# Facts About Bay Blue Crab Populations

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- Blue crab populations have **fluctuated considerably** over time.
- Blue crab populations are **influenced by a number of factors**, including: water quality, abundance of underwater grasses, harvest management, and maintenance of sufficient numbers of female crabs.
- “Watermen are at odds with sport fishermen who love the return of trophy rockfish which were almost fished to extinction until a moratorium was enacted in 1992. Now the rockfish are back in huge numbers. **Many watermen say that the explosion of the rockfish population is the cause of the low numbers for crabs.** They say that **when you clean your rockfish you will find they are full of crabs.**”
- And, why is the reality that – in addition to rockfish – **drum, croaker, trout**, and even **yellow perch** eat noteworthy numbers of crabs being ignored?
- **The factors identified above are very complex and clearly extend far beyond blue catfish.**

# Snakehead Schizophrenia

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- The northern snakehead first appeared in the Potomac River in **2004**.
- Snakeheads were “...**set up** to be the poster child for all invasives, because it had this fierce name and teeth.”
  - John Odenkirk, Fisheries Biologist, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
- “Anglers were exhorted to catch and kill as many as they could, lest the fish consume or outcompete their beloved bass and other keystone species. But, more than a decade later and despite its rampant spread, **fears about the fish’s environmental impact have yet to materialize.**”
  - Whitney Pipkin, Writer, *Bay Journal*
- “...I’ve been saying for years and continue to say that **there doesn’t seem to be an ecological impact yet...**”
  - Daniel Ryan, Fisheries Research Branch Chief, District of Columbia’s Department of Energy and Environment
- Over **40 years** have passed since Virginia introduced blue catfish into Bay waters. Are blue catfish being “**set up**” the way that snakeheads were?

# Why Not Managing Blue Catfish is Impractical & Imprudent

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- In November 2014, the then Director of Freshwater Fisheries at Maryland's Department of Natural Resources stated: "We **don't** want to manage this fishery, we want to knock it down to the lowest level possible and then keep it on that level."
  - This approach is not practical, nor wise, for a number of reasons, several of which have been highlighted by Dr. Donald Orth, Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, Virginia Tech:
    - It fails to leverage **lessons learned from other states**. For example, efforts to "control" populations of the introduced flathead catfish that virtually wiped out the prized redbreast sunfish in southeast Georgia rivers proved unsuccessful. The actual, realized result of this intense harvest of the flathead catfish was that flathead catfish **compensated** with earlier maturation and faster growth.
    - It fails to recognize reality, which is that "Catfish are here, they are on the move, and **we have to deal with them.**"
    - It also fails to acknowledge that "**Catfishing is a popular outdoor activity.**"

# What Comprises a Practical Management Approach? (Part 1 of 2)

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- It must be **realistic and balanced**, as Bay Catfish Advocates has publicly promoted since its inception.
- Realistic and balanced means the continuation of:
  - Efforts (e.g., formal studies) to **learn more** about blue catfish.
  - **Commercial fishing by traditional means** (which does not include electroshocking) that targets excessive numbers of **smaller** blue catfish.
  - The **establishment of additional markets** (e.g., restaurants, grocers, homeless shelters, etc.) for the **smaller** catfish harvested by commercial fishermen.
- Realistic and balanced also means implementing regulations that protect the **very small population** of trophy catfish that recreational trophy catfish anglers covet.
- Effective **stakeholder management based on conclusive, direct evidence**, in other words!

# What Comprises a Practical Management Approach? (Part 2 of 2)

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- Penalizing a major stakeholder (recreational trophy blue catfish anglers) by not protecting what that stakeholder values is **not** realistic and balanced.
  - Recreational trophy blue catfish anglers did not introduce blue or flathead catfish into Bay waters; biologists employed by the State of Virginia did.
  - Nor is the fault of recreational anglers that concerns about blue catfish were not formally pursued until **2012**.
- Last but not least, there must be **consistency across jurisdictions**.
  - For regulations (or the absence thereof) to differ so **wildly** across Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia – all of whom who should have very similar desires for the common watershed that is the Chesapeake Bay – is **incomprehensible**.
  - Virginia’s “no more than one blue catfish over 32 inches per day” rule has existed since **July 2006**. Why hasn’t Maryland done the same?

# The 1<sup>st</sup> Million Dollar Question

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- Is the Maryland Department of Natural Resources truly prepared to tell BCAs - a major stakeholder - that the below-depicted **“paylake reality”** is acceptable, or somehow preferable to managing its trophy catfishery in a realistic and balanced fashion?



# The 2nd Million Dollar Question

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- Is the Maryland Department of Natural Resources willing to accept the **grave consequences** associated with the very real risk that those who supply live wild blue catfish to out-of-state paylake owners could inadvertently introduce **Asian carp, zebra mussels, etc.** into our Bay waters, or **snakeheads** inadvertently taken from here to other states?
- *The Fishing Wire* reported on **June 15, 2016** that, due to a volunteer effort known as the Deep Creek Lake Launch Steward Program, a pontoon boat infested with zebra mussels was intercepted before it launched in Deep Creek Lake. Source: <http://www.thefishingwire.com/story/377706>
  - **Are similar pre-launch inspection resources present at all Maryland boat launch sites at all times that each ramp is open?**
- If the answers to the above questions are “No,” then implement and enforce the regulations that BCAs seek!
- Doing so will protect the interests of a major stakeholder (recreational trophy catfish anglers) and, simultaneously, protect our waters from the spread of Asian carp, zebra mussels, etc. by making it **unprofitable** for those who supply wild live blue catfish to travel to Maryland.



# Written Comments

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- Over 150 concerned catfish anglers took time from their busy real-world schedules to submit written comments in support of this specific BCA effort. These insightful comments will gladly be provided upon request.

# The End

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- Please direct constructive comments, questions, concerns, etc. to Bay Catfish Advocates, courtesy of Brad Hierstetter via telephone or text message (cell phone = 301-997-4945) or email (BCA@baycatfish.com, baycatfish@gmail.com, or brad.hierstetter@gmail.com)