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## Want Another Carp?

*The first casualty of the Asian black carp is a person.*

**By Ted Williams**

Fly Rod & Reel, June 2001

**Under President Clinton** the US Fish and Wildlife Service did well compared to its performances under past administrations. There were, of course, high points and low points. This column is about one of the latter. My devout hope is that the Bush administration can use the information to avoid similar disasters, reverse a gross injustice to one of the agency's most talented and dedicated professionals and, in the process, save the Mississippi River system from yet another Asian carp.

In 1990 the Fish and Wildlife Service assigned fisheries biologist Jerry Rasmussen, a 15-year agency vet with superb performance reports and eight major awards, to coordinate a new 28-state organization for cooperative fish management called the Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association (MICRA). Rasmussen was directed in writing, via a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the MICRA states, to "promote MICRA's interests," not the interests of the Fish and Wildlife Service as they are sometimes imagined by certain of its senior bureaucrats.

Without even a secretary Rasmussen built MICRA into a powerful, effective force for fish conservation and restoration. He did everything, even produced MICRA's nationally acclaimed bimonthly publication, *River Crossings*. To a man, the state fisheries chiefs—who represent their agencies at MICRA meetings—adored him. In 1994 he received personal letters of commendation from Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Vice President Al Gore. In 1995 he became one of the few federal employees ever to get the American Fisheries Society's coveted President's Conservation Award. With one of the 12 agency awards for his work at MICRA came a letter signed by regional director Sam Marler and assistant regional director John Christian, which read in part: "We are stretched very thin, and some dedicated federal employees respond to this challenge by working smarter and for longer hours than can be reasonably expected. They commit more of themselves for the resource than their job requires."

But in helping the 28 states in their effort to stop the aquaculture industry from infecting the Mississippi drainage with a fourth Asian carp Rasmussen committed a bit more of himself than some people in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Washington office had counted on. By doing his job—that is, telling the truth about the black carp, largest and most ecologically dangerous of the imported Asian carps, and helping the MICRA states defend themselves against it — he so irritated the industry that it complained to US Senator Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), who had worked for Clinton when he was that state's governor. On July 24, 2000 Sen. Lincoln hauled Fish and Wildlife Service Director Jamie Clark into her office and sat her down in front of two industry spokesman who had set up the meeting and who also had worked for Clinton while he was governor.

The spokesmen were black-carp producer Mike Freeze, of England, Arkansas, and Ted McNulty, vice president for agriculture and aquaculture at the Arkansas Development Finance Authority. Prior to the meeting, neither man had been shy about letting Clark know how he felt. "I want to voice my objection to USFWS subsidizing a radical and uninformed organization such as MICRA," McNulty had written in response to a notice she had posted in the *Federal Register* soliciting comments on a proposal to list the black carp as an injurious species under the Lacey Act. "Taxpayer money is being spent to post lobbying positions on a government web page and to accuse people trying to make a living of being selfish. At best this is a waste of money and might be considered illegal. I ask that the USFWS immediately sever all connections with MICRA and end its memorandum of understanding with the MICRA states immediately."

The charge against Rasmussen (conflict of interest) was first raised by USFWS fisheries chief Cathleen Short, a delegate to MICRA who never bothered to attend a single meeting. Short claimed that Rasmussen had helped the 28 states prepare a petition to his own agency (the Fish and Wildlife Service) to list the black carp as

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injurious. It was true. But it was also true that Rasmussen's written orders in the MOU required him to do precisely this—i.e. "promote MICRA's interests." Before Clark got leaned on by the "Arkansas Mafia" (as some Fish and Wildlife Service personnel now refer to Sen. Lincoln and her Clinton-connected aquaculture constituents) and while the MICRA states were still preparing their petition, Rasmussen met with or spoke with his supervisors dozens of times and never once was the issue of conflict of interest mentioned.

Getting 28 states to agree on anything, much less a strongly worded petition on the dangers of an alien fish, should have been grounds for yet another award. Instead Washington demanded Rasmussen's head on a platter. At that point the regional office stepped in, asking that it be allowed to at least reassign him to an invisible position at the Rock Island, Illinois office of the La Crosse, Wisconsin Fishery Resource Office. In agency doublespeak, he was being shielded from "a situation that could be perceived as conflict of interest." So when I asked Short about Rasmussen's treatment she was able to accurately state: "That really was a regional decision and a regional action." Then she said, not so accurately, that her "whole involvement has been relative to the petition to list black carp under the injurious wildlife provision of the Lacey Act."

According to the Public Employees for Environmental Ethics (PEER), which came to Rasmussen's defense, he has been ordered not to talk to anyone, especially the press. However, I had no trouble getting information from his many friends and colleagues inside and outside federal government, among them Dennis Riecke, a fisheries biologist with the Mississippi Dept. of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.

"We were told [via the feds] you don't talk to him," says Riecke. "That's bullshit. Someone who's not my employer is gonna tell me I can't talk to someone in the United States?"

**It was Dennis Reicke** who blew the whistle to MICRA about what was going on in Mississippi where, as in so many other southern states, resource agencies run and jump for aquaculture as if they were circus poodles. To understand the black carp crisis in Mississippi you have to go back 10 years to when Donald Robohm, president of SeaChick fish farm in the south coastal town of Escatawpa, wanted to raise tilapia—a sunfish analogue from Africa that was already wreaking ecological havoc in Florida. When Robohm, a prolific and passionate letter writer, was informed that state law prevented this, he took his case to the legislature, which promptly changed the law. The best the state could do was require him to install screens and filters to guard against escapement, which is about like guarding against an amphibious landing by planting poison ivy. In short order the tilapia were loose and reproducing in the Thompson's Branch of the Pascagoula River, where they remain to this day. It was the fault of ospreys, says Robohm. When the mouth-brooding male tilapia get taloned they spew fry over any water that happens to be underneath.

Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks sent down a crew that made an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate the naturalized tilapia with rotenone, removing six truckloads of the aliens along with just one bucket of native fish. When the department revoked Robohm's tilapia permit temporarily (today he's probably the biggest producer in the state) he claimed he was being abused and took his case to the legislature, which promptly transferred regulatory authority for fish farms to the Dept. of Agriculture. So when Mississippi catfish farmers started playing with black carp there wasn't a thing Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks could do except give advice to the Dept. of Agriculture, an outfit that doesn't care much or understand much about aquatic ecosystems.

Pack any species together in tight quarters and parasites are going to flourish. Three years ago a trematode that moves from pelicans to ram's horn snails to fish started killing a few commercially raised channel cats. Black carp, which can grow to six feet and more than 150 pounds, eat snails and mussels; so they can break the cycle by cleaning out the ram's horn snails in a fish pond. Chemical alternatives such as copper sulfate and lime are available, but they're more expensive and perhaps less effective. Native molluscivores such as redear sunfish, blue catfish and freshwater drum might also work, but they've not been evaluated.

After black carp wipe out the snails and mussels (except for zebra mussels, which they can't pick off the structure), they eat crustaceans (such as crawfish) and God knows what else. The threat to native fish, many of which depend on mollusks and crustaceans, is significant; the threat to freshwater mussels—the most

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endangered group of animals in North America—is enormous. Waterfowl such as canvasback ducks feed heavily on the fingernail clams of the Mississippi system. If black carp get established there, these already stressed ducks will take a hit from which they may not recover.

An injurious listing for the black carp isn't going to mean a whole lot because the species is already in the country being propagated in research and production facilities in Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and maybe elsewhere. Although black carp haven't yet turned up in the wild, they may already have escaped into the Mississippi system from a catfish farm in Missouri. But at least injurious-species status would proscribe future importation from Asia and impede (although not stop) interstate transport.

Farmers of channel catfish contribute about \$500 million a year to the US economy, or about half the volume of the entire aquaculture industry. What catfish farmers want, catfish farmers get; and what they want is black carp. The Mississippi Dept. of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks pled with the state Dept. of Agriculture to at least make the catfish industry use sterile ("triploid") black carp. That's not much protection, because in order to make triploids you have to have fertile "diploids," and virtually every hatchery in existence has had fish escape from it. Also, fish may be mistakenly certified as triploid when they're actually diploid. But diploids, explained the Dept. of Agriculture, are cheaper and more readily available, and the industry just had to have them. So, as I write, Mississippi catfish farmers are flinging black carp around the state and even importing them from Arkansas.

"If we could remove Arkansas from the Mississippi drainage, we'd be a long way to improving conditions for some of our native fish," declares MICRA member and past chairman Marion Conover, chief of fisheries for the Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources. It was Arkansas and its fish farmers that gave us the other three Asian carps—grass (now extant in 45 states), silvers and bigheads. The grass carp were going to eat aquatic weeds. The silvers and bigheads were going to clean up pollution by eating phytoplankton and zooplankton, respectively. The industry assured all hands that it wouldn't let them escape, and if by some act of God or osprey they did escape, it assured all hands that reproduction in North America would be impossible.

Today in parts of the Mississippi River commercial fishermen can't lift their nets because they're so full of bighead carp. In October 1999 a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist investigating a fish kill on a Mississippi backwater in southern Illinois counted 157 silver carp, 18 bighead carp, nine grass carp, 30 common carp, and one individual each of five native species. On a recent visit to find what swims in the waters of Mark Twain's mighty Mississippi a Japanese film crew encountered acres of carp rolling and leaping, occasionally landing in their boats. One cameraman got hit on the head.

"We prohibit black carp in Iowa," says Conover. "But we can't keep them from swimming up the Mississippi River. We prohibited bigheads, too, and we have millions of pounds of them. Ted McNulty and the whole industry have it exactly backward. They say that unless you prove black carp are harmful they should be allowed to use them. They stuffed that down our throat in St. Louis at a MICRA meeting we hosted with the catfish farmers. They're in tight with [Sen.] Trent Lott [R-MS] and other politicians, and they're just going to walk right over the natural resource agencies."

Such walking was recently accomplished by another prolific and passionate letter writer, one Pete Kahrs, of Osage Catfisheries, Inc., Osage Beach, Missouri. By persuading the state Dept. of Conservation's policy-setting commission (comprised of lay people) to "reign in," as he puts it, the professional fish managers, he got the department to raise black carp for him. This despite the fact that his fish farm was the one from which black carp may have escaped into the Mississippi system (via the Osage and Missouri rivers) after flood waters swept over the ponds in 1994. "Three fish were unaccounted for," Kahrs told me. "But maybe they died." Anyway, he says, black carp are now being widely and inadvertently distributed throughout the Midwest with baitfish from Arkansas. The fact that black carp haven't been seen in the wild doesn't prove anything because they look so much like grass carp that they may have gone unnoticed. At least the state will be providing him with triploids, and it vows to wean him (and the other fish farmers who will get the fish) within five years so that the state can be "black-carp free."

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**Kahrs, McNulty, and Freeze** have attacked Rasmussen for using “inflammatory” language and publishing “misinformation” in River Crossings. Wrote Kahrs in one of his letters, this to Anita Gorman of the Missouri Dept. of Conservation Commission: “MICRA posts lobbying positions on government web pages using state and federal electronic mail, to accuse people, i.e., private taxpayers trying to make a living in the aquaculture industry, as ‘selfish’ and ‘whose only interest is the financial gain of the few’ as it relates to the use of black carp.”

Rasmussen’s exact words in River Crossings were as follows: “All of the Asian carps will thus likely be thought of by our grandchildren as ‘natives’; and even worse, our grandchildren may never see or know that species such as the paddlefish, buffalo, and others ever existed—all because of selfish, self-serving decisions made for the benefit of a few people in the late 1900s!” If that statement is inflammatory, it’s because it’s the exact truth. Moreover, I’d say it’s about time federal resource managers started talking that way. If more of them did, they’d get more respect and our fish and wildlife wouldn’t be going down the tubes so fast.

“Jerry did the right thing,” comments MICRA chairman Bill Reeves, chief of fisheries, for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. “He stood up for the resource, and he got punished for it. I didn’t know that people in federal service got treated like that. All us fish chiefs have talked to each other about it, and we agree that Jerry did what any good employee for the Fish and Wildlife Service would do. He’s a go-getter. He’s always been a credit to the service. He’s dedicated; he’s passionate about big rivers and riverine resources. And that passion and desire to do good is what got him in trouble. When this black carp issue came up in Mississippi, allowing fish farmers to utilize diploid black carp, MICRA took it up as an issue. I told everyone that, since I’m the chair and not from a catfish-producing state, I could be used to take the heat. And that worked well until that delegation from Arkansas went to visit Senator Lincoln.”

Marion Conover agrees. “I think I can speak for hundreds of professionals that Jerry was a casualty of fish politics,” he says. “It wasn’t handled correctly at all, and certainly he had done nothing wrong. It’s sad when one contact with a senator can do that. But it wasn’t just Jerry. As far as I’m concerned the 28 state partners got dumped on big-time by the Fish and Wildlife Service. There was no consulting with MICRA, no follow up, no questions. The decision was made with no input from states.”

I find it astonishing that, after trashing our aquatic ecosystems with hundreds of alien species, including three Asian carps and a European carp, we are now arguing about introducing another carp. Over the past century we’ve unleashed at least 135 alien species on the Mississippi system alone. Measured just by dollars, this has been a national disaster. But we’ve learned nothing. We still talk about miracle fish from abroad that are going to eat all the bad stuff and leave all the good stuff. We wander down expressways like sleepwalkers; and when smart, tough resource professionals such as Jerry Rasmussen yell at us to wake up we still round them up and ship them to Siberia.

As Marion Conover observes, we’ve got to forget about proving a species is “injurious” and banning it and, instead, ban everything that we haven’t proved harmless. The regulatory framework for preventing infestations of alien species is hopelessly inadequate. We need new federal legislation. And, more than that, we need the courage and decency to stand behind the good people who try to show us the way.