

PRESIDENT'S BLOG

FEBRUARY 2023

I enjoyed attending the 83rd Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference in Overton Park, Kansas. Kudos to the organizing committee for putting on a great meeting. The socials were fun, including a Super Bowl party to watch the home team win it all, and a game night that included bags, boardgames and some very talented karaoke singers. Engaging with student presenters during the poster session, at the student/professional luncheon and the mentor social was a highlight for me, as were many of the presentations I heard. Great job, Kansas!



AFS student/ECP travel grant winners

[Dr. Solomon David](#) from Nichols State was a featured keynote speaker at the meeting. His talk on underappreciated ancient native fishes, including gar that have been the focus of much of his research, is the inspiration for this blog piece. Dr. David's talk highlighted the important function that native species like bowfin, gar, buffalo and freshwater drum can play in aquatic ecosystems. Yet these species are often lumped into the "rough fish" category that allows unlimited harvest in state fishing regulations that includes undesirable species like common, bighead and silver carp. This can lead to the public to feel that some native fish have no ecological value, or even view the killing of these species as beneficial for gamefish.

Here in Minnesota where I work, we have been ground zero for activity to increase protection for these under-appreciated species. A [video posted to YouTube in 2021](#) (since removed) showing the spearing of dozens of gar through the ice for sport went viral and got the attention of many people, including elected officials, who became concerned when they learned this was legal under current fishing regulations. This prompted a 2021 bill that was signed into law that required MN DNR to set a bag limit for gar, a process that is approaching the final stages of completion. In 2022, a petition from the Isaac Walton League and other organizations requested MN DNR remove native species from the rough fish category. MN DNR is convening members of the public from different interests, including bow fishers, to develop proposed new regulations. In 2023, a ["no junk fish" bill](#) was introduced in the Minnesota legislature that would fund an MN DNR report that would require recommendations for statutory changes to better protect native species currently classified as rough fish.

Part of the push for these protections is a growing appreciation of these species among anglers. Decades ago, burbot were often left on the ice by anglers who thought they were benefitting walleye by removing a competitor. Today, many anglers target burbot and savor the "poor man's lobster" they prepare with their catch. Lake sturgeon fishing has grown to be extremely popular in Minnesota as populations in several large rivers have recovered from overfishing and past pollution. Websites like [roughfish.com](#) cater to the growing number of anglers who target non-game species, including the growing number of anglers who maintain "life-lists" of the diverse species they have caught.

It seems that these species, some of them around since the time of dinosaurs, are finally gaining some appreciation in the modern era. It will not be simple to set regulations for species that have also been underappreciated by management agencies who lack information on population status or even basic demographics for these species. However, I would suggest that we need to start somewhere and use an adaptive approach as we learn more. I know other states are watching how things develop in Minnesota and may be considering similar changes. I look forward to AFS as a venue for information exchange through our publications and at our meetings as we grapple with this issue.



Brian with his favorite catch of 2022

Enjoy the final clenches of winter before spring FINALLY arrives!

Brian Nerbonne