



CONGRESSIONAL SEAFOOD CO. presents...

MEET THE FISH

Invasive Wild Blue Catfish: The Greatest Environmental Threat the Chesapeake Bay Ecosystem has ever faced

The wild blue catfish is one of the greatest environmental threats the Chesapeake Bay has ever faced. Blue cats are native to the Ohio and Mississippi river basins. **These fish are top of the food chain predators that live for more than 20 years and grow to over 100 pounds!** They were introduced to the James River in the 70's as an alternative recreational fishery. **Today blue cats have completely taken over and represent almost 75% of the volume of fish in the James.** Their infestation has spread geographically to the neighboring rivers. The York, the Rappahannock and the Potomac all have incredible populations of blue cats now. It is not uncommon for a commercial "haul seiner" (a type of harvest gear for blue cats) to catch 50,000 pounds of blue cats in one haul. There have been catches of 100,000 pounds in one single pull of the net.

These fish are incredibly destructive. They eat anything and everything in their way. Not only do they outcompete the native species for their food by eating massive quantities of menhaden, blue crabs, worms, eels and freshwater mussels, but they prey heavily upon the native fish species and their young. Anadromous fish species like wild rock, blueback herring, American shad, white and yellow perch go upstream in all our tributaries of the Chesapeake to spawn. The anadromous fish larvae turn into fingerlings and the fingerlings spend the summer in the upper reaches of the each tributary. **With the explosion of their population, now a wall of 5-50 pound giant blue cats are waiting for these fingerlings and devour them.** Blue cats feed in the top of the water column and pin their prey against the surface in a feeding frenzy much like bluefish or rockfish. These are not docile fish. They are apex predators just like sharks, but they reproduce like rabbits.

Blue cats have now been discovered in the Choptank River. The Choptank is the number one breeding and nursery area for rockfish in the Bay. Earlier this summer blue cats were caught off Gibson Island in the main stem of the Bay off Baltimore. It is documented now that they can withstand up to 17 parts per thousand salinity. They are spreading rapidly throughout the entire bay and nothing is currently stopping them.

One VIMS study this summer documented that wild blue catfish consumed over 1.5 million pounds of blue crabs and over

1 million pounds of menhaden in just one tributary in the span of only 60 days. If we allow the blue cat population to proceed unchecked, then what happened in the James River, is a microcosm of what is happening in the York, Rappahannock, and Potomac, and what will eventually happen to every single tributary in the Chesapeake Bay.

We currently harvest approximately 10 million pounds of wild rockfish sustainably, each year out of the Bay. This figure includes both recreational and commercial harvest in both Virginia and Maryland waters. It is a billion dollar industry on the Atlantic coast. The Chesapeake Bay spawns 70 % of the rockfish that swim along the Atlantic coast. That means that 7 out of 10 rockfish caught off Massachusetts this summer, were born in the Chesapeake Bay.

A runaway blue catfish population in the Chesapeake Bay will definitely impact the population of rockfish in the Bay and eventually the entire Atlantic coast.



Currently the total harvest of blue cats is only 3 million pounds. **There is an estimated 100 million fish (500 million pounds) in the Bay now and that population is growing exponentially.** We need to harvest in excess of 40 million pounds annually for the foreseeable future to try and stop the infestation of this species in our Bay's tributaries. In all likelihood, we will never eradicate the blue cat. The best we can hope for is to keep their population at a level where they don't completely adversely impact the native species.

If you catch 40 million pounds of blue cats, you have to sell them. That means we have to create 10-15 times the demand for this fish than there is now. It should be everyone's civic duty to put wild blue catfish on their menu. It is grillable and has a white, flaky meat that tastes fabulous. **It doesn't taste like what you would expect a catfish to taste like. It tastes like a rockfish because it eats everything a rockfish eats, including plenty of rockfish.** The challenge of course is that you have to market this fish (more than the traditional species) to your customers. **The argument that "my customers won't eat catfish" doesn't hold water. We have dozens of customers including two James Beard award-winning chefs that are currently serve thousands of orders of blue cat every week.** The economic benefits derived by an increase in the wild blue cat harvest are very significant. We will create hundreds of jobs and tens of millions of dollars of revenue in some of the most remote communities around the Bay. It's a "win-win" situation. We "eat-em to beat-em" and everyone benefits. Satisfied customers make happy chefs and happy chefs buy more blue catfish.



So put your money where your mouth is and sell this fish.
You will be selling a healthy, locally caught sustainable seafood protein that your customers will love.

The Chesapeake Bay, and all the native species living there, will thank you too.



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