

GREAT PLAINS

Resolving "A (Fish?) Bone of Contention"

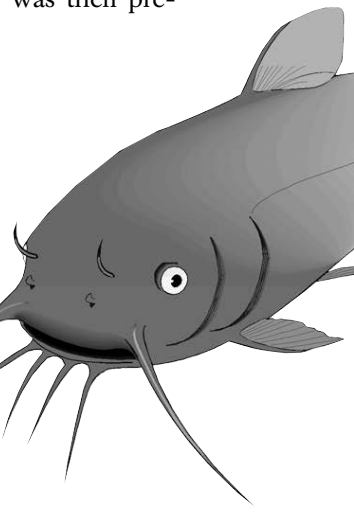
The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission began stocking catfish in the Buffalo River in 1951, long before the establishment of Buffalo National River in 1972. Continuing this practice after park establishment, the Game and Fish Commission has introduced an estimated 1.4 million fish of several species in the past 50 years. In 1988, the stocking issue became contentious when the National Park Service requested the commission to cease stocking catfish in the Buffalo River until adequate scientific data could be collected to assess the effects and results of stocking.

The National Park Service had a serious situation to address. The Game and Fish Commission considered the Buffalo River a *put-and-take fishery* and had a limited concept of NPS fisheries policy. The public was outraged at a misinterpreted newspaper statement

attributed to park staff that “catfish probably never existed in the Buffalo River anyway.” During this process the park lacked expertise in fisheries management to resolve many of the issues with the state biologists.

How were we to resolve this “bone of contention” as the Game and Fish Commission director described the issue? The park staff attacked the problem on three fronts: holding direct and informal discussions with state biologists, conducting joint fisheries research projects directed at the issue, and developing a cooperative fisheries management plan for the river.

We began by inviting a cadre of NPS, Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries biologists to come to the park and develop goals, objectives, and an outline for a fisheries management plan. The resulting draft document was then pre-

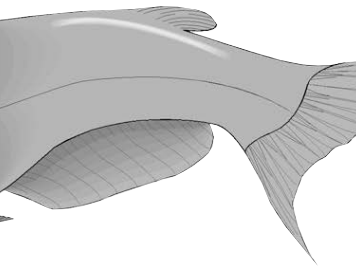


sented to the state agency field staff for review and discussion before further review by their upper management. This gave us needed support at the field level and resolved many of the basic issues up front. Public meetings were held throughout the watershed for the draft plan

review. We also engaged in discussions with the Game and Fish Commission regarding other issues and projects that helped to open dialog and promote better understanding of our mission.

Many benefits accompanied this approach to conflict resolution. Communication between us and the state improved, leading to cooperative projects in other areas of wildlife management. We had access to more complete expertise that the park lacked on its own. Most recently, a Game and Fish employee has been assigned to an interagency liaison post within Buffalo National River headquarters.

The resulting fisheries management plan has served as a nationwide NPS model of a warm water fisheries management plan. Copies are available upon request. Contact the Su-



perintendent, Buffalo National River, National Park Service, P.O. Box 1173, Harrison, AR 72602; 501-741-5443.