

Why We Are Here

by
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The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission is composed of five volunteer citizens appointed by the Governor of the State to establish policies and programs in Florida to protect fish and wildlife as well as other natural resources. In our State, we have a daily influx of 800 new residents, all of whom require new infrastructure, roads, schools, housing, and other items necessary for quality life. Additionally, we have millions of tourists visit annually, many of whom enjoy and demand, in addition to our residents, quality fishing, hunting, and other natural experiences.

The Commission, as would any group, prefers to establish policies based upon clear-cut issues with yes and no answers. The use of grass carp in large open systems however is not one of those issues. This fish has been controversial in this State, and many others, for 25 years. I am not sure that even the Commission staff has a consensual opinion on the proper role and use of the grass carp in Florida waters.

Why we are here is simply this. Florida is experiencing serious infestations of submersed weeds, principally hydrilla, and this plant is now present in every watershed in the State. Approximately \$6 million/year of public funds are spent annually for chemical, mechanical, and biological control of hydrilla, primarily to maintain fisheries and wildlife habitat, access for boaters, and for flood control purposes. The grass carp has been in the State since 1970, and years of research and experience has been attained by scientists and fisheries biologists.

Locally, Orange and Lochloosa lakes provide 20,000 acres² of prime sportfishing, and associated wetlands are used by bald eagles, osprey, otters, snakes, insects, gators, and many other types of critters. A drought, producing low-water levels and extensive hydrilla growth, has reduced lake use by fishermen to nearly zero the past 2 years. In good condition, these lakes have been estimated to produce an economic benefit to this area of over \$10 million/year. These lakes have contained various amounts of hydrilla for over 20 years; but in the past 2 years, over \$1 million worth of herbicides have been used in these lakes.

It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that \$1 million will purchase many grass carp, and we know that they can provide weed control for 10 to 20 years. It would appear the decision to use the grass carp for aquatic weed control is a simple issue of economics. Unfortunately, this is not so. We have been told that the grass carp is the greatest thing since sliced bread. We have also been told that the grass carp can be an ecological disaster. It is difficult to understand how such opposite opinions can be held by scientists, but the purpose of scientific inquiry is to develop facts on which sound decisions can be formulated. I believe it has been an unwritten policy of the Game and Fish Commission to not stock important fish and wildlife management lakes until we are reasonably assured that environmental degradation will not occur. The public, however, figures that after 25 years of research, how much longer will it take to learn to use this fish? After all, if we can place people on the moon, how difficult can weed control be?

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² A table of factors for converting non-SI units of measurement to SI units is presented on page xvi.

I am at this symposium to learn what we are doing in this and other States with regard to the grass carp. Can we manage the fish in our large lakes? Can we remove them if necessary? Will the fish migrate during high water?—Upstream or down? What questions

need to be answered, and what facts need to be gathered?

The people in attendance at this meeting can provide many answers to my questions. We greatly appreciate your attendance.