

Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission Concerns Regarding the Use of Grass Carp

by
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The Division of Fisheries is concerned with overstocking of triploid grass carp and the introduction of diploid grass carp into the waters of the State. To reduce the chances of either of these events occurring, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission requires permits to possess grass carp. All sites larger than 5 acres are inspected by Commission staff prior to permitting. Sites less than 5 acres are permitted following a telephone interview with the applicant. Barriers are required to prevent movement of triploid grass carp out of permitted water bodies. Public water bodies must be approved for stocking by a committee of biologists and administrators from the Commission staff and the Department of Environmental Protection.

The use of grass carp to control noxious aquatic vegetation is a strategy of considerable concern to wildlife managers in the Division of Wildlife. During the early years of development of herbivorous fish as a management tool, the needs of wildlife were often little more than an afterthought. This problem escalated, at least in part, because of the failure of wildlife managers to express these concerns to those researching the use of grass carp.

Wildlife losses resulting from habitat destruction are usually insidious. Impacts to species' population dynamics are often not detected until long after significant damage has occurred. Assessing impacts on wildlife resulting from local anthropogenic manipulations of habitat is greatly complicated for migrating species. They, of course, can be affected by events on the other side of the continent.

Like some fish populations, certain wildlife species can flourish in changing habitat

conditions that precede an impending environmental crash. As nutrients enter an aquatic system and become expressed as noxious vegetation, local wildlife use of that system often heightens. This kind of response can result in the misreading of wildlife signs observed over the short-term. If not cautious, observers can become advocates of preserving deteriorating habitat conditions.

Grass carp have proven their effectiveness in certain controlled vegetation management strategies on small (<500 acres) water bodies. It has been repeatedly demonstrated, however, that results are highly variable where grass carp have been used to control vegetation on larger (>500 acres) water bodies. In fact, results are far from consistent on small water bodies. One thing is absolutely certain. Grass carp will consume aquatic vegetation.

That single fact leads us to our greatest concern regarding the use of grass carp. In their eagerness for relief, people plagued by problematic aquatic vegetation are sometimes willing to employ unproven solutions that can lead to other complications. The future, responsible use of grass carp is jeopardized by the frustration of those looking for a quick fix for their vegetation problems.

Hydrilla is usually managed on a crisis basis. Lakes with the most obvious problems are the ones that receive the most public and political attention. The enormous biomass constituted by topped-out hydrilla in large lakes necessitates stocking large numbers of grass carp to effect control. Loss of desirable habitat can result from our inability to remove grass carp once control is effected. Until an efficient

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method of recovery is developed, this complication will persist.

A further problem is that sociological and economic rather than biological considerations usually drive the political process regarding vegetation management. If habitat needs of wildlife are not made a high priority, wildlife values will most assuredly decrease as vegetation is managed with other objectives.

Aquatic vegetation houses important links in food webs that sustain wildlife resources that make Florida so aesthetically pleasing. Those resources are of vital economic importance to many Floridians who care a great deal about how well aquatic systems are managed.

It is our hope that wildlife values will be made a high priority in the development of aquatic vegetation management strategies.