Native fishes of the San Juan River, NM

Dramatic landscapes and big fish

The San Juan River runs for about 380 miles through northwestern New Mexico. It originates in the high mountains of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado before heading into Utah. It continues for another 120 miles before flowing into Lake Powell and joining the Colorado River.

As the San Juan River flows into New Mexico, its waters are captured by Navajo Reservoir, along with waters from three tributary rivers (Los Pinos, Red Rock, Navajo). Below Navajo Reservoir, the river flows over cobble in a channelized channel. Cold, clear water released from the reservoir creates a trout fishery in the tail waters of the reservoir.

Both Colorado Pikeminnow and Razorback Sucker were nearly eradicated (made extinct) from the San Juan River and were listed as federally endangered in 1967 and 1987, respectively. Critical habitat in the San Juan River is designated from downstream, to include the San Juan river at Lake Powell in Utah.

Reduction and alterations of river flows, changes to habitat, and the establishment of new fish species on the primary stream to native fish species in the San Juan River in the past 50 years has drastically altered the water flow and habitat of the San Juan River. The construction of Navajo Dam in 1963 has drastically altered the way that water flows in the San Juan River in several ways. Seasonal variability in river flows has been reduced as water is managed for urban and agricultural use. Because there are several large, low-slope reservoirs in the New Mexico portion of the river, there has been a reduction in habitat range is particularly significant for fish like the Colorado Sucker and Razorback Sucker.

Another important effort is habitat restoration. In the New Mexico portion of the river, habitat restoration projects have been undertaken to create new habitat and improve existing habitat. This has included the removal of barriers to fish migration, the creation of new spawning and rearing habitat, and the restoration of native vegetation.

Other recovery efforts include the stocking of the river with the endangered fishes to bolster their populations, and suppressing populations of non-native fishes that compete with endangered fishes. The efforts of the SRBF have been successful. The range and distribution of the endangered fishes has increased dramatically. Stacked fish are reproducing in the wild and wild populations have increased. Project management and monitoring of the endangered fish have contributed to the development of scientific knowledge about the life histories of these species.

Information on this poster

This poster will be distributed maps for each fish species and a graph illustrating the amount of water flowing in the river (flow chart). These are divided into three periods that are important phases in the recent history of the San Juan River.

Historical – 1960s: Discharge was relatively high. Rivers could be found running high and taking on a brown color. These are periods that are important phases in the recent history of the San Juan River.

In the 1970s to 1980s: Discharge became more predictable and less variable. The construction of dams and reservoirs in the San Juan River basin limited the movement and habitat range of native fishes. This period is particularly important because it marked the beginning of the recovery efforts for the endangered fishes.

In the 1990s to 2000s: Discharge in the San Juan River has been consistent and monitoring has shown that the endangered fishes are reproducing in the wild.

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