

ILLEGAL FISH STOCKING

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Cape Nature Conservation has received disturbing news that sharptooth catfish (barbel) are present in the Clanwilliam Dam (Olifants River System) and carp and sharptooth catfish are now in Theewaterskloof Dam (Breede River System). Both dams are nationally recognised bass waters. These species were illegally introduced as they were never previously found there and Cape Nature Conservation (CNC) never received an application to stock them. These introductions are, unfortunately, examples of an increasing tendency by farmers and anglers to introduce fish into new or existing waterbodies without applying to CNC for permission to do so. This trend is likely to have significant negative consequences, both ecologically and for sportfisheries on which the anglers themselves depend.

It is widely accepted that the principal cause for the threatened status of all endemic W Cape freshwater fishes has been the impact of introduced fish species. This was well illustrated during a recent 50/50 TV program on the consequences of uncontrolled stocking of fish within the W Cape. Readers who saw this program should remember the difference between the underwater footage taken of an area of a stream (in the Olifants River System) with no bass compared to that in which bass were present. The area without bass was entirely natural and contained a high density of indigenous fishes (in this case Clanwilliam redbfin minnows *Barbus calidus* and the sawfin yellowfish *Barbus serra*). Downstream below a waterfall bass were present and not a single indigenous fish was to be seen in the footage. Here, algae on which the fish normally graze coated the rocks and bottom of the river. The expression "aquatic desert" is apt in describing the lack of indigenous life in this section of the river. Hence the introduction of yet another large predator into the species rich but highly threatened Olifants River system can only be regarded as an ecological disaster. Sharptooth catfish (barbel) are likely to place added pressure on 8 species of fish only found in this river (all are threatened with extinction) and they could well gain access to pristine tributaries turning more of them into "aquatic deserts".

CNC acknowledges that certain introduced species are economically important and give anglers tremendous recreational pleasure. Species such as rainbow trout and largemouth black bass are here to stay and certain sections of rivers and certain dams have been zoned as trout waters and bass waters to cater for the interests of anglers. Areas dominated by introduced species comprise most of the accessible fishing waters in the SW Cape. However, CNC's mandate is to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems and species in the W Cape. Aquatic systems and species in the Western Cape need special attention as there are few rivers left in a relatively pristine condition for the conservation minded public to enjoy. These rivers and our indigenous fish species are what is left of a unique and priceless biotic heritage and should enjoy the protection and care of not just CNC, but the public at large. It is thus essential that the current distribution ranges of introduced species do not expand. To achieve this, the support of all is required.

Finally, it is likely that those thoughtless and selfish anglers who introduced carp and sharptooth catfish (barbel) into Clanwilliam and Theewaterskloof Dams may themselves initiate a collapse of the excellent black bass fishery in these dams. Both introduced species are voracious predators of fish eggs and are active at night when male bass are at a disadvantage when guarding their nests. Only time will tell what the long-term consequences are.

CNC wishes to have a positive and mutually beneficial interaction with an educated and caring angling community. There are good reasons why the movement of live fish in South Africa is regulated by conservation authorities and persons wishing to transport live fish are reminded to have in their possession a valid stocking permit. This excludes the purchase of ornamental fishes for home use.

(Editor's Note: The Clanwilliam Yellowfish is, in my subjective opinion, not only a most beautiful fish but one, which pound for pound, is considered to be superior to both bass and trout. The anglers mentioned by Mr Impson have, in ecological terms, perpetrated a deed which can only be described as

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evil. The people who, decades ago, first introduced fish species from foreign countries into our waters had no means of judging the environmental impact of what they did. No-one can today use that defence. The combination of bass and barbel in the Olifants River will undoubtedly cause the extinction of some of the indigenous fish species which are not only unique to that watershed but were dwindling in numbers even before the barbel were introduced. Jake Alletson, formerly of the Natal Parks Board, told me that bait fishermen are illegally introducing carp into many trout streams in the foothills of the Natal Drakensberg. When one considers that in the Underberg area alone, some four hundred thousand rand annually accrues to the local community from rod fees paid by trout anglers, then the enormity of these illegal translocations become apparent.