

Alligator Gar: Rough Fish, Racism and Conservation

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Mankind's history of conservation is relatively bleak, even among our early ancestors who killed only what they needed to survive and took advantage of natural resources to their full extent. The first humans to reach North America made homes from mammoth tusks, clothes from mammoth fur, rope from sinews and ate the meat. Yet still megafauna were extinct from North America not long after the arrival of homo sapiens. The Maori didn't recklessly kill the giant birds they found on Aotearoa to sell the feathers and waste the rest, yet still the moa and giant eagles were extinct shortly after Polynesians first arrived. This century we can reach space, explore the depths of the ocean, and know more about our natural world than we ever have, and still conservation is typically an uphill battle. Even as most scientists provide data hoping to conserve what we have left they must contend with economics and politics. Often even as conservation efforts progress many species are ignored, sometimes until it's too late. The alligator gar, the largest of the extant and possibly all gars, nearly became one such species.

Born and raised in Texas, I have seen more images of alligator gar killed and bloody, surrounded by their proud killers, than I have of alligator gar swimming in a bayou. Fortunately, my quest for viewpoints painting alligator gar as nuisance species or a threat to popular fish yielded no well-founded scientific perspective (Brown). But there is still a stubborn wedge of the population with little regard for the conservation of the alligator gar among other species (Kerlin).. Not only with alligator gar but with most threatened and misunderstood animals when I picture someone who has killed an animal and is proud of it, that individual is a white male. As an avid fisherman I am a

member of a number of local fishing groups and I cannot count the amount of short sighted comments, incongruous with responsible game fishing, that I come across and they are typically from white males. Kerlin reviews a study by UC Davis that essentially aligns the term “rough fish” with racial pejoratives and argues to shift the official terminology as a means to further conservation efforts of fish such as gar. The perspective of relating persecution of fish such as alligator gar to white male colonial attitudes provides a very relatable perspective given the continued importance of salmon to Indians of the Pacific Northwest (Smithsonian). Washington Tribes continue to face an uphill battle in conserving part of their way of life and a crucial aspect of their economy in yearly returns of salmon. In addition to federal and state regulations, individual tribal members constantly have to contend with resentful and bitter sport and commercial fisherman as one small ongoing aspect of racism.

Until recently, many anglers and water enthusiasts across the southern United States and Mississippi river drainage regarded alligator gar as an undesirable resident of the ecosystem. Popular opinion suggested that alligator gar preyed largely on more desirable gamefish such as largemouth bass, catfish, and even saltwater species such as redfish and flounder given the gar’s euryhaline nature (Liebach). As a result of their long-standing status as a non-game species, alligator gar have been fished, bow-fished, even culled to the point of extirpation in much of their range (Brown). Until 2009, Texas had little to no regulation on alligator gar fishing. Statewide, gar could be harvested without limits to size or number and, as a popular bowfishing target, were often taken with little intention to make subsistence use of the fish. However, since 2009 Texas and other states have been increasingly moving to protect what populations of

alligator gar they have left. In 2009, Texas Parks and Wildlife initiated a daily one fish, no size limit to harvesting alligator gar. In 2009 Texas Parks and Wildlife also added mandatory reporting for all alligator gar harvests as well as some special regulations for particular bodies of water. Substantial opposition to a statewide closure to nighttime bowfishing for alligator gar resulted in this measure being removed (TPWD). Texas is not the only state to recognize and take measures towards favoring the alligator gar. In 2010 Illinois, from which the alligator gar had been extirpated in the 1960's, began a program to reintroduce alligator gar. As attitudes changed, the Illinois Division of Natural Resources and US Fish and Wildlife service began a program to reintroduce gar within their native range. In spite of some speculation, the intent was not that alligator gar could control invasive Asian grass carp populations as many naturalists believe alligator gar would be insufficient as a control measure. Alligator gar were introduced as their popularity as a trophy gamefish began to increase. The article also features a picture from 1966 which may be the last alligator gar in Illinois. It reaches taller than the two white men standing proudly beside its dead body (IDNR).

The alligator gar is a large and ancient species of ray-finned fish native to coastal areas of the southeastern United States into Mexico and much of the Mississippi river system. Alligator gar and their fellow gar have evolved little since the era of dinosaurs and feature such unique and primitive physiological traits such as thick, nearly impenetrable scales and a primitive lung through which gar can breath air, enabling them to survive in poorly oxygenated and stagnant water, particularly in smaller stages and mating seasons (TPWD). Alligator gar can achieve lengths of over 2.5 meters and reach over 150 kg, species in the 1.5 to 2 meter and 100 kg range are not uncommon (Liebach).

Fish achieving such sizes tend to be over 50 potentially reaching 100 years in age. In spite of early fishermen's assumptions that alligator gar prey on gamefish, alligator gar feed primarily on forage and baitfish as well as invertebrates putting them in competition with gamefish more so than a predation relationship (IDNR).

As I wrote this analytical essay, I sought published work that would provide an opposing or outdated view on alligator gar. Kerlin writes "from art to religion to land use, much of what is deemed valuable in the United States was shaped centuries ago by the white male perspective. Fish, it turns out, are no exception." Though I did not seek to analyze the conservation of alligator gar as an issue of race, gender, colonization or class, I now cannot see it otherwise. I hadn't considered the conservation of alligator gar to be such a reflection of current social issues and progressive attitudes, but if the shoe fits. My quest for an "opposing" viewpoint was pushed by images dancing in my head of alligator gar, loaded with arrows and struggling away from a boat, or strung by their neck near a truck and surrounded by smiling and proud "hunters". Perhaps the continual progression of social views of Americans can also transition into conservation. As more people come to recognize the harm history has done to many groups of society, we must hope the future will also be brighter for the gars, and salmon, and with them every member of society equally.

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