**Alligator gar caught in Columbia River**

*April 22, 2020*

From Paul Holfarth WDFW District Fish Biologist

A commercial carp fishermen fishing in the Yakima River delta near Bateman Island – at the mouth of the Yakima River in the Tri-Cities – netted what look to be two alligator gar on April 13. They released the fish, as required by the permit, but did notify Paul Hoffarth asking what type of fish they were. These fish are not native to the Pacific Northwest, and it is believed to be the first time they have been documented in the Columbia River.

State and tribal co-managers are treating this as credible, but have not been able to verify on their own. Tribal crews attempted to find the fish through electrofishing the area but did not find any alligator gar. Fishery managers don’t have any evidence at the moment that there is a widespread problem. But, the department continues to stay coordinated with others and staff are looking into it.

It’s likely that someone had them in a pond or aquarium and ended up dumping them in the river. And, in most of those cases, fish reared in a controlled environment are unable to survive very long in natural waterways with fluctuating water temperatures, such as the Columbia. So, at the moment, this is very much a fact-finding mission.

* The fishermen reported their catch of the two gar – each between 24 and 36 inches in size – by sending the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) district fish biologist a short video of the fish. The biologist spoke with the fishermen by phone and then met them in the field to verify it was legitimate by identifying the boat and other gear.
* WDFW fishery managers have revised the commercial fishermen’s permit to allow the retention of alligator gar, as well as northern pike. In addition, the department has asked the fishermen that if they catch any of these fish to flag the location on a map and provide it to the department.
* Based on the discussion and the video, department biologists are treating it as credible and are coordinating with tribal co-managers who plan to continue to try and capture the fish by electrofishing. Once staff are authorized to return to work, WDFW will also likely mobilize electrofishing boats.
* The goal is to find the fish that were recently caught and remove them. Removing the fish early is critical in helping to keep them from establishing. Hopefully, those are the only alligator gar in the river but that’s really an unknown at the moment.

**Non-native to the Columbia River**

* Fish biologists do not know how the alligator gar got there. One possibility is that someone had them in an aquarium or pond and decided to dump them in the river.
* It is unknown if these individual fish are sexually mature or if they will spawn. However, some outside experts have identified them as immature alligator gar.
* As with any non-native species, the concern is these fish could become established and pose a serious threat to native fish species, including salmon and steelhead.

**Alligator gar (*Atractosteus spatula*)**

* The alligator gar (*Atractosteus spatula*) is long lived (100 yrs.) and is the largest species in the gar family. Alligator gar are not native to Washington. Mature individuals commonly measure 6 ft. in length and weigh over 100 lbs. Alligator gar are an opportunistic predator primarily feeding on fish (piscivores), but are known to eat waterfowl and other small animals.
* There is no evidence of spawning.
* Spawning occurs in the spring when water temperatures reach 68-82 oF. Adult females mature at about 10 years of age (when they commonly spawn) with males maturing at about 5 years of age.

  

