How anglers support the Sport Fish Restoration Program.

Investing in Illinois Angling

(Photo courtesy Kent Wamsley, The Nature Conservancy.)

Story By Ashley P. Spratt
Photos by Tim Edison, Illinois Natural History Survey

Since 1950, it's been the perfect reason to buy even more fishing gear: Whenever an Illinois angler buys a lure or rod and reel at a local outdoors retailer, he or she has directly invested in projects that help support fish and wildlife resources in our state.

"Directly and indirectly, anglers provide almost 100 percent of the funding for fisheries activities within the Department of Natural Resources including hatchery and stocking programs, sport fish habitat restoration, and surveys and research," said Jim Hodgson, chief of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Midwest Region.

The federal program, which is funded through a small tax on all fishing gear, was created in 1950 as the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act (often referred to as the Dingell-Johnson Act). It does for sport fishing what the 1936 Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act does for wildlife.

For anglers, the benefits run deep. The sale of state fishing licenses serves as base funding for state fisheries management and conservation activities; however, the Sport Fish Restoration Program generates additional funding for fisheries research, propagation and education.

Over the past 75 years, Illinois sportsmen and women have contributed to the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Act, bringing to the state more than $274 million for conservation efforts.

"The program is based on the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation—the user pays, the user benefits and the fish are sustained," Hodgson said.

The WSFR Program has generated more than $12.9 billion in federal funding since 1939 for state fish and wildlife agencies across the U.S. including more than $274 million for the Illinois DNR. In 2012, this user-pay, user-benefit program will celebrate conservation

Fishing Illinois' waters is big business, with annual angling-related revenues topping an estimated $776 million annually.

successes over three quarters of a century, 75 years since the program's original inception in 1939.

According to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation, more than 777,000 anglers, both resident and non-resident, fish Illinois' freshwater rivers and streams each year and spend more than $776 million on fishing-related expenditures. The program provides a major contribution to the Illinois economy, and a major return on investment for the Illinois angler.

In 2011, nearly $7.2 million was apportioned to the state of Illinois for Sport Fish Restoration projects. Fisheries research, development and stocking of fisheries, and operation and maintenance of facilities such as angler access and fish hatcheries are the primary areas of investment by state natural resource agencies for Sport Fish Restoration funds.

How are those "fishing-tax" revenues spent? Here's an example: Fish populations in portions of the Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio and Wabash rivers are under close surveillance by Illinois' natural resource managers in an effort to analyze past and present impacts—natural and man-made—to fish populations in Illinois waters.

Popular target species for today's Midwestern angler, such as largemouth bass, walleye and even catfish, have been surveyed for more than half a century by the Illinois Natural History Survey and Department of Natural Resources, thanks to these user-generated funds. And, with the help of that federal funding, survey efforts have expanded to cover all four of Illinois' major rivers.

William Starrett, a former director of the INHS Forbes Biological Station at Havana, began in 1957 what would become one of the longest-running riverine fish community surveys in the country. Starrett's Long-Term Illinois River Fish Population program documented changes in fish populations in the Illinois River for 94 fish species and six commonly occurring hybrids. With the support of the Sport Fish Restoration Program funding, the Illinois DNR has expanded this long-term monitoring effort in the past two years to include sampling sites along Illinois' other major rivers including the Ohio, Wabash and portions of the Mississippi.

John Chick, aquatic ecologist with the INHS National Great Rivers Research and Education Center, explained the purpose of the survey expansion: "We are now able to track populations of fishes that are of major value to the recreational fishery in all four of Illinois' major rivers."

In the late 1980s, the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers supported a separate, but similar long-term data-collection program to monitor fish and water quality from five reaches of the upper Mississippi River system and one reach of the Illinois River. Coupled with the recently expanded data-collection program, natural resource managers in Illinois now have the most current and reliable fisheries data to assist with management decisions regarding Illinois' riverine habitats.

"The state of Illinois recognized the need for better information on the recreational and commercial fisheries of its large rivers and saw the opportunity to combine the information from the two data collection projects," said John Epifanio, INHS fish biologist.

Illinois' long-term riverine fish community monitoring efforts were expanded 2 years ago to include sampling locations along the Ohio, Wabash and portions of the Mississippi rivers.

75 Years
IT'S YOUR NATURE

By investing in long-term fisheries research through the Sport Fish Restoration Program, anglers contribute to efforts to improve fishing in Illinois.

"We divide rivers up into series of reaches designated by locks and dams, or between major tributaries," he said. "Each reach runs between 25-30 miles in length."

Four to six sites are randomly selected in each reach three times between mid-June and October for a total of 12 sampling locations in each reach in a given year.

The long-term data provides natural resources managers the opportunity to track changes in the watershed, whether those changes are associated with implementation of environmental legislation such as the Clean Water Act, invasive species such as Asian carp, or transportation changes with the construction and use of new locks and dams.

Chick explained the data from the Long Term Illinois River Fish Population program have been able to show a dramatic impact of the 1972 Clean Water Act to the fish community in the Illinois River. The new information collected on fish populations in portions of the Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio and Wabash rivers will be very valuable for assessing the expansion of invasive species such as bighead and silver carp, and their effects on native fishes.

"The current crisis impacting Illinois waters are the bighead and silver carp," Epifanio said. "From a recreational fishing standpoint, they are a big threat because they feed at the lower end of the trophic level, meaning they eat microscopic plants and animals, which is the exact forage base used by larval and juvenile stages of important recreational fishes, such as walleye, catfish and bass."

The expansion of fish-population monitoring in Illinois signals that natural resource managers are increasing awareness of the challenges to maintaining Illinois' ecosystems.

Chick also pointed out the multiple uses for Illinois' rivers: "We also have to keep in mind that these are working rivers. They are used for navigation, transportation and commerce in addition to recreational use. We have to juggle management of the resource under these existing conditions."

Just as the importance of Illinois' boundary rivers continues to grow, more scientific information is needed about Illinois' fisheries to allow conservation partners, both state and federal, to manage and protect these fisheries and aquatic environments. This is exactly why the Sport Fish Restoration Program, and the funding it generates for statewide fisheries management and research in Illinois, is so critical to the future of Illinois angling opportunities.

Why should the Illinois angler be interested in this (and similar) long-term fish population-monitoring programs? First, whether or not they are aware, Illinois anglers are major investors in this long-term fisheries research. Secondly, the data collected allows natural resource managers to analyze impacts, both man-made and natural, to the very fish communities they angle, meaning better fishing in the long run.

The Sport Fish Restoration Program, along with its wildlife model, the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, generates funding for conservation and wildlife management activities for state natural resource agencies through an excise tax on hunting, shooting, fishing and boating sport equipment.

The sale of state fishing licenses serves as base funding for state fisheries management and conservation activities; however, the Sport Fish Restoration Program generates additional funding for fisheries research, propagation and education.

"Think about what we've been able to accomplish with Sport Fish Restoration funds—it's truly amazing," Epifanio said. "This funding source for fisheries management and research, as well as the partnership between anglers, the fishing equipment industry, states and the feds helps us get to our bottom line and that is balancing the needs of resource users today with those of the users tomorrow."

For more information about the conservation successes of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, visit www.wsfr75.com or www.fws.gov/midwest/wsfr.

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(Photo courtesy Kent Wamsley, The Nature Conservancy.)