Channel catfish

*Ictalurus punctatus*

There are some 39 species of catfish in North America. They are found in just about every river, stream and channel in our country, and are important as a source of food and as a recreational sport fish. The channel catfish is abundant throughout the Chicago River and other local waters. Today, their presence can serve as a good monitoring tool for the health of the river.

In natural waters channel catfish prefer flowing rivers, but can also be found in lakes, ponds and other sluggish bodies of water. They are usually found where bottoms are sand, gravel or rubble. Channel catfish generally prefer clear water streams, but also do well in muddy water. During the day they are usually found in deep holes wherever the protection of logs and rocks can be found. Adults rarely move much from one area to another and are rather sedentary, while young fish tend to move about much more extensively, particularly when feeding at night.

Channel catfish are important members of the river food chain. Based on stomach analysis, young catfish feed primarily on aquatic insects such as dragonflies, damselflies, and beetles. Adults have a much more varied diet including insects, snails, crayfish, algae, aquatic plants, seeds, other smaller fish, and even birds.

A healthy population is a sure sign of a healthy habitat. Declining catfish populations can be an indicator of decreased water quality, and a fish kill can be a sign that something catastrophic has occurred within their habitat. You can help by monitoring and reporting the following conditions:

**LOW OXYGEN:** Like other animals, channel catfish need oxygen to for energy and growth. However, oxygen is at most only about 25 percent as abundant in water as in the air. To get oxygen, fish must expend more energy than air-breathers. If the oxygen concentration in the water is low, a fish has to breathe faster if it is to meet all of its oxygen requirements.

**ROAD SALT:** Female catfish produce about 4,000 eggs per pound of body weight. Eggs can hatch and young will develop in waters with a moderate salt content, but the lower the better. Winter road salt dissolved in spring rains can increase the salinity of river water and decrease spawning success.

**FERTILIZER:** Elevated levels of phosphates and nitrates, both commonly found in fertilizers, can destroy fish tissue and disrupt cellular metabolism. A common source of household phosphate is dishwasher detergent, although there are eco-friendly alternatives. Phosphates and nitrates rarely occur in lethal doses in the Chicago River; however. A more common problem is the increased plant growth associated with fertilizer runoff. This can create low-oxygen situations and fish kills, as excessive plant growth decomposes.