



Tidal River Blue Catfish



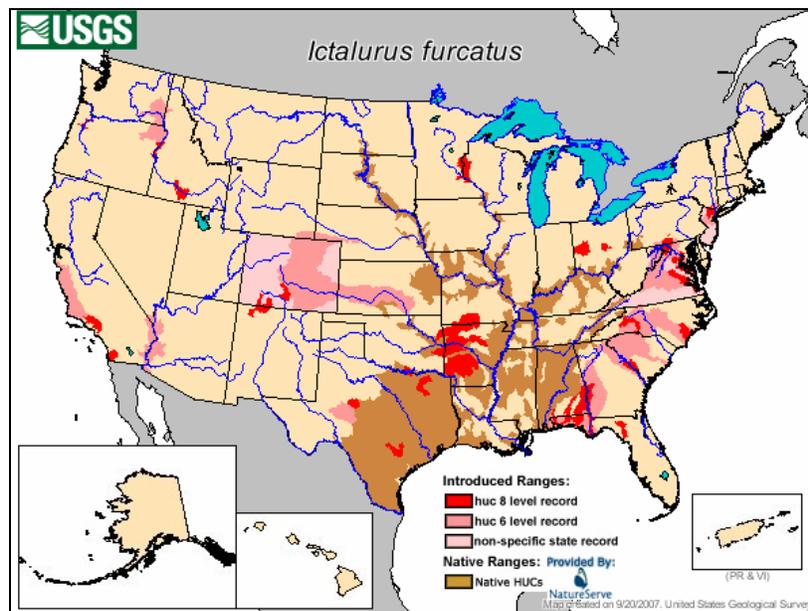
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While several of Virginia's tidal rivers offer excellent opportunities to catch blue catfish, the James River is recognized nationally for its trophy blue catfish fishery. Articles highlighting the world-class status of this fishery have appeared on websites and in publications such as *In-Fisherman*. As a result, people from around the country are traveling to Virginia for guided "James River Blue Cat" fishing trips. Another large component of the fishery includes anglers from nearby states and other areas of the Commonwealth who are traveling to localities near the James (such as Richmond), spending vacation time and money to "fish the James". What draws these anglers is the opportunity to catch fish which regularly weigh-in in the 30 – 50 pound range. The current state record blue catfish, weighing over 102 pounds, was caught in 2009 from the tidal James River.

Blue catfish are a large fork-tailed catfish species native to the Mississippi River. They were first introduced to Virginia with stockings in the tidal James and Rappahannock rivers in the early 1970's. In 1985, a number of blue catfish were released in the Mattaponi River, and fish from this river eventually populated the Pamunkey River. Blue catfish have also colonized the Piankatank River and the tidal Potomac River system, and now occur in all of Virginia's major tidal tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay. Blue catfish are also found in Bugs Island Reservoir, and the Blackwater, Dan, and Nottoway rivers.

These introductions are not unique, blue catfish have been widely introduced throughout the United States.

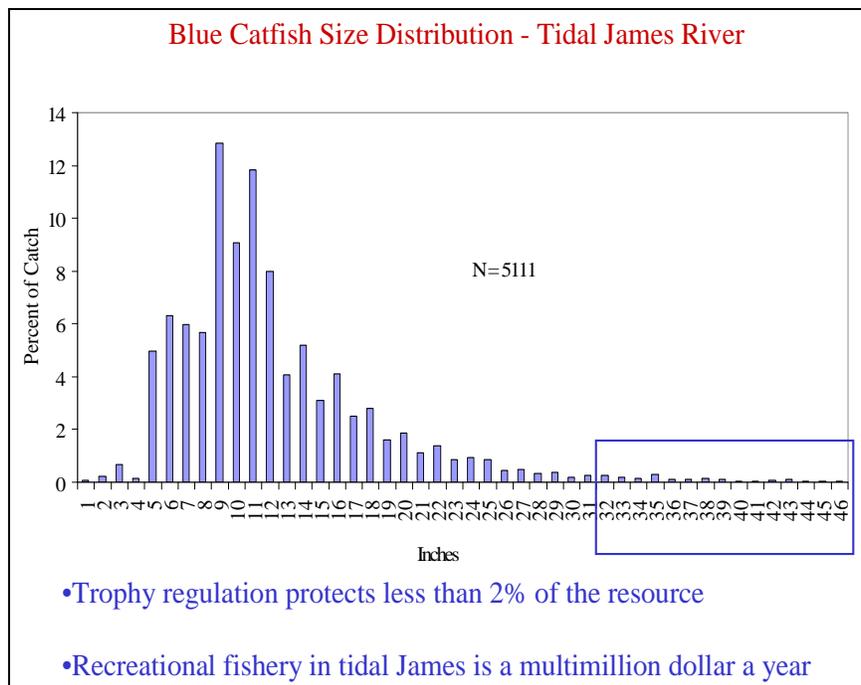


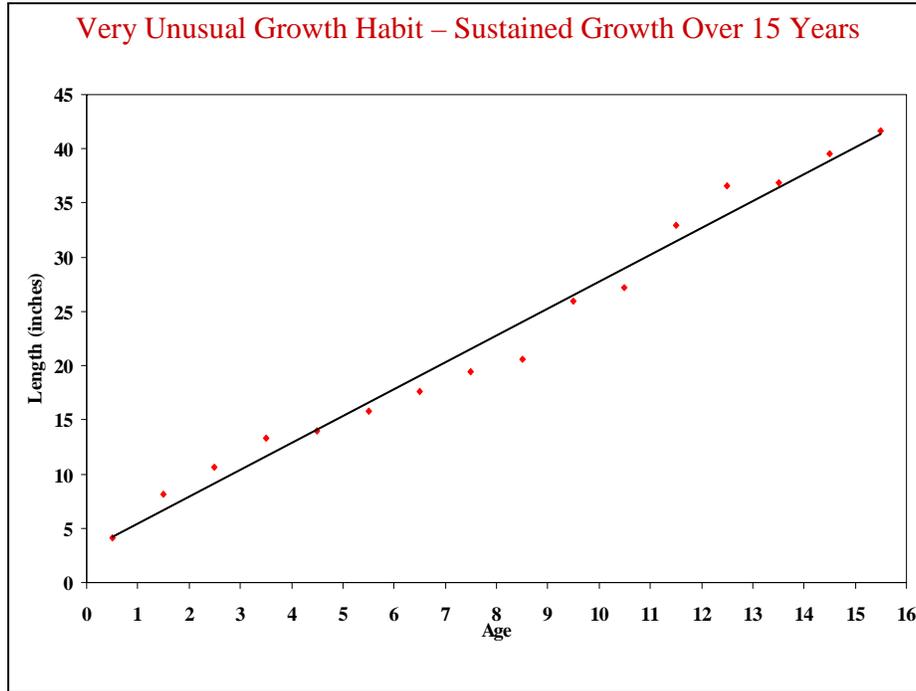
The long history of introducing fish species for recreational and food value dates back to at least the 1890's in Virginia's tidal rivers. Species not native to these rivers which have been successfully introduced include: channel catfish, common carp, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and bluegill. Channel catfish, introduced during the 1890's, are closely related to blue catfish.

At this point, it would be hard to overstate the abundance of blue catfish in Virginia’s tidal rivers. In spite of substantial levels of harvest, blue catfish populations have expanded dramatically. According to records maintained by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, in recent years Virginia’s tidal rivers have supported over 1.5 million pounds of commercial catfish harvest annually. However, while smaller-size blue catfish are overly abundant, the number of large fish available for trophy-oriented anglers is relatively low. Fish over 32 inches account for less than 2% of blue catfish found in the tidal James River, and less than 1% of blue catfish found in Virginia’s other tidal rivers.

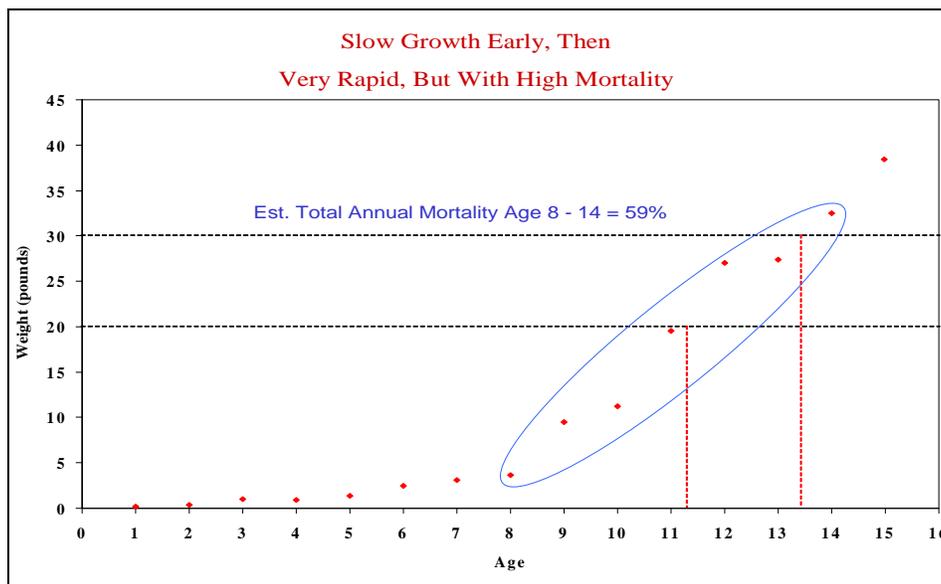
On July 1, 2006, a regulation went into effect to limit possession of blue catfish over 32 inches to one fish per person per day. Restricted harvest of large fish allows fish to be recycled (caught and released) – resulting in more fish living to achieve even larger sizes, and to be caught again. There is no limit on harvest of blue catfish smaller than 32 inches from Virginia’s tidal rivers.

What is the background behind the “32 inch regulation”? Trophy-oriented anglers desired harvest restrictions on larger blue catfish, with the hopes of enhancing the trophy potential of their fisheries. These requests, when combined with the biological data, indicated a “trophy” regulation was warranted. Additionally, there is a Virginia Department of Health consumption advisory in place which recommends no consumption of James River blue catfish over 32 inches, and one meal per month of this size fish caught from other rivers. Given all these factors, a one fish over 32 inch regulation was deemed appropriate. The proposed regulation was coordinated with Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) to determine potential impacts on the commercial fishery, and to verify that the regulation would apply to all, regardless of the method of harvest.



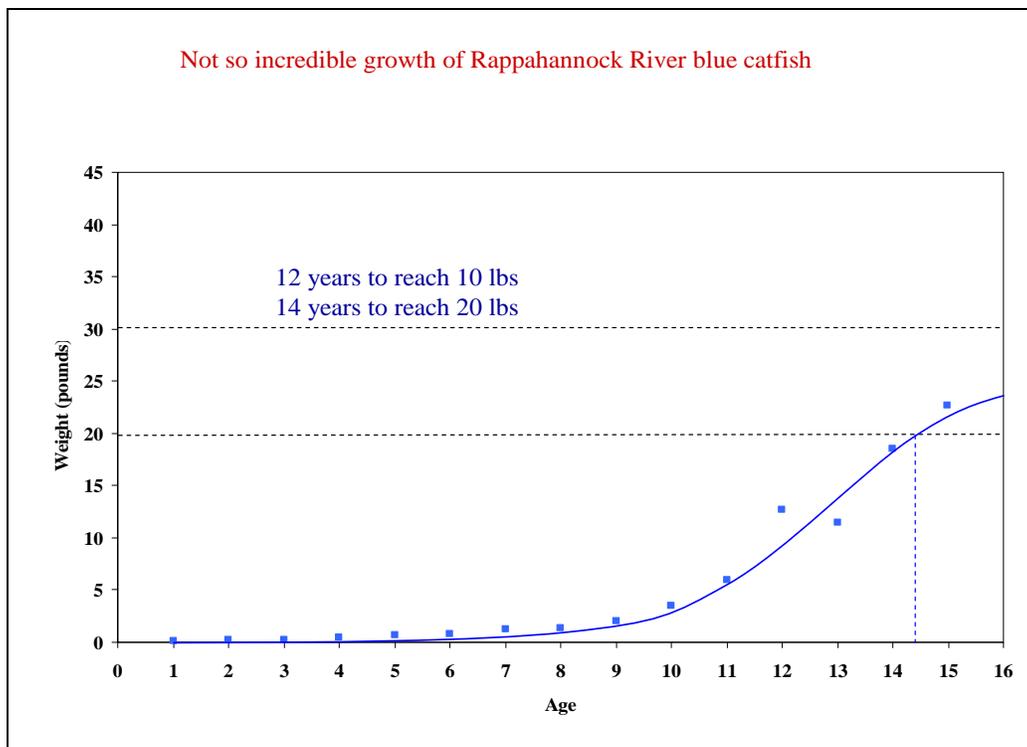


Blue catfish in these rivers steadily increase in length over a fairly long period of time (15 years). However, they put on weight slowly for the first several years of life, with dramatic weight gains starting only after a diet shift to larger more energy-rich prey items. Blue catfish in the James River average only 3 ½ pounds by age-8. However, with a rapid increase in growth, they average 10 pounds at age-10, 20 pounds at age-12 and 30 pounds at age-13. Individual growth is highly variable in larger fish, and fish in the James are known to reach 50 pounds by age-11, although age 13 – 15 is more typical.

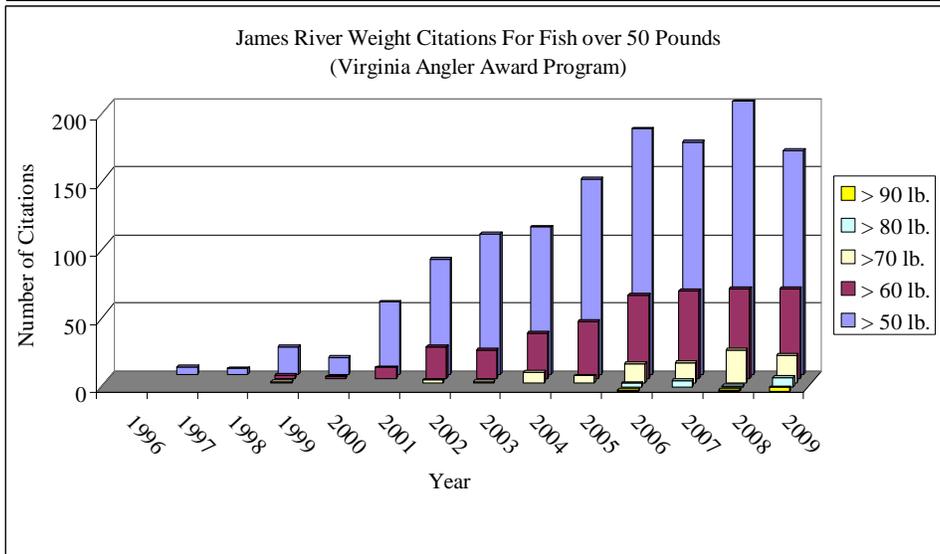
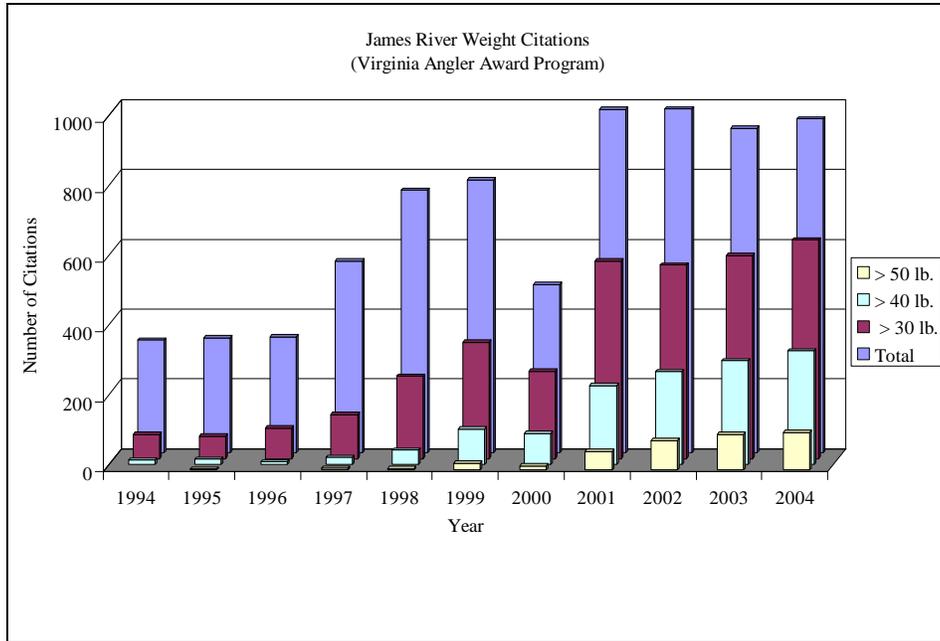


For blue catfish ages 1 – 8 in tidal rivers total annual mortality is low (29%). However, as blue cats reach the age where rapid weight gain occurs, mortality increases dramatically, approaching 60% in 2004. With this high level of mortality, harvest restriction will likely benefit the trophy aspect of the fishery.

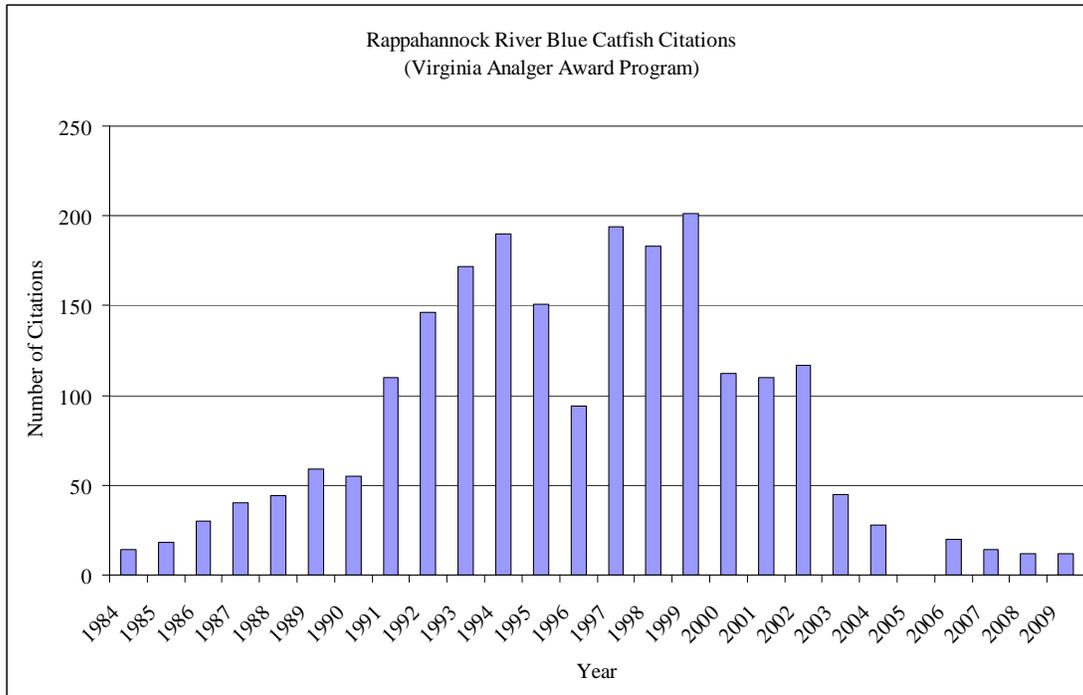
Whereas, the James is capable of producing “trophy” blue catfish in good numbers, blue catfish in the Rappahannock River grow at a much slower rate. The average blue catfish in the Rappahannock would not achieve 30 pounds even if it were to live 25 years. The oldest blue catfish recorded to-date from Virginia was a 25 year old fish from the Rappahannock River. That isn't to say there aren't any blue catfish in the Rappahannock over 30 pounds, some faster growing individuals make it over 30 pounds, there just aren't very many of them.



Approximately 35 years after being introduced, blue catfish continue to expand in the tidal James and its tidal tributaries. In the mid-1990's it was extremely rare to catch a blue catfish over 40 pounds, today fish in the 50 pound range are common, and fish over 80 pounds are the rarity.



As opposed to the James, the number of blue catfish citations issued each year for the Rappahannock has declined precipitously since 1999, with just 12 citations issued in 2009. With the slow growth of blue cats in the Rappahannock, any fish returned to the river, or recycled, as a result of the 32 inch regulation will be a bonus for anglers hoping to catch a rare “trophy” fish.



Growth of blue catfish in the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers is slowing; this will impact the capacity of these rivers to produce trophy blue catfish. However, rapid growth in the recent past produced good numbers of fish to 50 pounds, with rare angler reports of fish to 80 pounds and above. Many of these fish remain in the river available for anglers to catch.

Large blue cats in these tidal rivers prefer to feed on abundant schooling species of fish, primarily gizzard shad, when they are available. Anglers use this knowledge of catfish feeding habits, fishing with fresh-caught gizzard shad as bait.

River Summaries

1 – James River: Virginia’s premier trophy blue cat fishery, with good numbers of fish to 60 pounds, and fish to 80 pounds occasionally caught. A new state record blue catfish fish weighing 102 pounds 4 ounces was caught in 2009.

2 – Mattaponi and Pamunkey: Currently, good numbers of fish to 50 pounds, with anglers reporting the rare fish to 80 pounds. In 2009, 67 weight citations were reported by anglers for blue catfish from these two rivers.

3 – Rappahannock River: Whereas this river produced good numbers of citations until the late 1990’s, today the trophy potential of this river is low due to slow growth. As with Virginia’s other tidal rivers, an abundance of smaller fish are available to anglers looking to take home fish for the table.