

Big bass in rivers? You're kidding me!

As the sun tucks away behind the swampy skyline, I stand in waders at the Sipsey River boat landing discussing fishing, religion, and this year's cotton crop with Joe Price, a 73-year-old retired farmer. "The river hasn't changed much," he says. I smile—half because I enjoy the nostalgia and half because it affirms my hypothesis that this river is still quite natural and also because any other statement might keep me up at night.

The Sipsey River, situated in west-central Alabama, is a special place for a number of reasons. Considered one of the 10 natural wonders of Alabama, the Sipsey is teeming with big fish, baldcypress trees, and healthy freshwater mollusk populations. Its splendor has remained in large part because there are no dams on the Sipsey River, a very rare attribute of rivers worldwide. What this means is that during wet periods (winter in Alabama), the river floods in dramatic fashion and humans do nothing about it. In late spring, the river falls back inside its banks but leaves behind pockets of water on the landscape (<1 acre), deemed floodplain lakes.

The connection between these lakes and the main channel, I believe, is crucial to the unchanging quality of the Sipsey River fishery. Largemouth bass populations are particularly healthy. The Sipsey River supports some of the best largemouth bass fishing around and this has flown under the radar—perhaps as the well-kept secret of a few. Fish over 8 lbs. are common enough that it doesn't take a Ph.D. in crankbaits or a \$50,000 bass boat to catch one. Why does such an ecosystem produce these sized fish?

I have been investigating the Sipsey River fishery for over a year to evaluate how unregulated streamflow affects fish populations. Although I'm studying

10 different species, for now I'd like to tell you about the largemouth bass. Size-at-age data indicates that growth rates are high, much higher than state-wide averages. Floodplain lakes are also loaded with juvenile (current year's) bass during spring and early summer, suggesting that these are critical spawning and nursery habitats. Moreover, strength of annual largemouth bass cohorts indicates strong correlations with annual streamflow. Years of lower streamflow supports stronger largemouth bass year classes than higher flows years. Conversations with regional fisheries managers suggest similar ecological patterns operating in other river-floodplain ecosystems.

Southern reservoirs are the epicenter of largemouth bass fishing in America. In 2006, 10 of 14 Bassmaster's series tournaments are taking place in southern reservoirs, including the championship. In short, bass fishing is a big business and is important to many as a hobby to improve upon as well as a way to reconnect with nature. Why have unregulated rivers been ignored as places of high quality fishing or even as models of healthy ecosystems?

Maybe we just didn't think of it. After all, it is somewhat surprising that these swampy rivers produce lunkers. Or maybe it is because so few unregulated rivers remain. Bass fishing is a fairly recent phenomenon which has blossomed in the last 30 years, a timeframe through which



dams had been erected on most rivers. Additionally, most of our unregulated rivers are located in regions of low human population which may limit word of mouth. Of course, I hope in writing this I'm not destroying the well-kept secret of many a savvy southern fisherman. I am interested in finding out why unregulated rivers promote healthy, fast-growing fish populations and transferring this knowledge to a regulated setting where hydrology is under our control. The goal is to restore a more natural hydrograph which would result in a better fishery and bigger fish.

It's a refreshing sunset at the Sipsey landing—not just because the baldcypress trees rise from the river water as if Jack planted his bean stalk here about a thousand times, or because of Joe's fish-filled cooler, but because we know this is a special place, largely untouched by human hands. The air seems fresher and we know that big fish (and snakes!) are swimming in this river. I imagine that this is how nature was intended to be enjoyed and how many rivers looked a thousand years ago. ☺