

Lake Conroe Conservation Efforts Receive State, National Recognition -2013 National Fish Habitat Partnership's Ten Waters to Watch

Lake Conroe has suffered more than its share of ups and downs over the years—pun intended.

The lake north of Houston has been plagued with infestations of exotic vegetation damage to native vegetation by an overpopulation of grass carp introduced to get rid of the exotic vegetation, a degraded watershed, lack of shoreline habitat for fish and dissension over what to do about all the problems.

Finally, in 2006, a coalition of public and private organizations, local businesses, community residents and anglers was formed to find a more holistic way to develop a balanced aquatic ecosystem while managing invasive species and expanding biodiversity through native plant introductions.

The coalition's efforts were recognized May 1 by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), which named the Lake Conroe Habitat Improvement Project Coalition the 2013 winner of the Texas Environmental Excellence Award in the Civic/Community category.

Lake Conroe has also been listed as a 2013 Waters to Watch by the National Fish Habitat Partnership. The list recognizes water bodies that will benefit from strategic conservation efforts to protect, restore or enhance their current condition.

In short, Lake Conroe is on the road to recovery.

The road has not been short and smooth, but it has been traveled by a committed group of more than 200 individuals and organizations determined to make the lake better. "Large-scale reservoir habitat restoration efforts are larger and more costly than any one agency, state or federal, can undertake on its own," said Jeff Boxrucker, coordinator for the Reservoir Fisheries Habitat Partnership.

"This project is important to Texas because it is one of the first reservoir stakeholder coalitions to form in this state, demonstrating how a diverse mix of caring people can connect resources and expertise in route to a better quality of water, habitat and life," said Dave Terre, chief of research and management for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Inland Fisheries Division.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Inland Fisheries biologist Mark Webb is one of the leaders of the Lake Conroe project. He stressed that the project's success was due to the leadership of the San Jacinto River Authority and their concerted efforts along with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to involve all interested stakeholders—anglers, property owners, businesses and government agencies—and to address the multiplicity of problems plaguing the lake. "By utilizing the principles of adaptive management toward common goals, the strengths of multiple cooperators will continually improve the Lake Conroe ecosystem into the future," he said. "This project benefits the environment by reducing harmful exotic vegetation in a sustainable manner, increasing sustainable native habitat for fish and other wildlife, sequestering harmful nutrients, reducing bank erosion and stabilizing bottom sediments. Fish, wildlife and everyone who uses the lake will benefit from the improved water quality."

One of the greatest benefits of the project has been the bridges built between various interest groups in the community, from property owners to businesses to anglers. "This project has brought a wide range of stakeholders closer together, which has been a positive for the angling community," said Ron Gunter, Assistant State Conservation Director for the Texas B.A.S.S. Nation. "Agendas have been established that take into account the best interests of the reservoir and its fishery. New partnerships have developed, and this has brought an influx of fresh ideas, assuring that the fishery will be protected now and in the future."

Approximately \$1 million has been spent on the project so far. Five miles of shoreline have been planted with native vegetation, and four acres of fish-attracting structures have been placed into the lake. A nursery has been built to provide plants for expansion of the introduction of native plants. Planned future projects also include the placement of more fish-attracting structures into the lake, creation of a constructed wetland, creation of a watershed protection plan and publication of a Lake Conroe recreation guide.

Partners and sponsors of the Lake Conroe project include the San Jacinto River Authority, Seven Coves Bass Club (which is also the Lake Conroe Friends of Reservoirs chapter), B.A.S.S., Reservoir Fisheries Habitat Partnership, Texas B.A.S.S. Federation, *Dock Linemagazine*, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Experiment Station and Lewisville Aquatic Ecosystem Research Facility, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Black Bass Unlimited, Texas Association of Bass Clubs, Lake Conroe Association, Toyota Texas Bass Classic, Entergy, Bass Pro Shops, U.S. Forest Service/Sam Houston National Forest, Texas A&M University and the University of North Texas.