

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

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Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation,
Wildlife and Oceans Hearing
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Introduction

The double-crested cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) has become the poster bird for a group of piscivorous birds that are wreaking havoc on sport fish populations and aquaculture facilities throughout many areas of the country. It is no longer possible for any fair-minded person to believe that cormorant populations are not excessive. The exponential growth of cormorant numbers in recent years necessitates immediate management steps that should have, in all honesty, already been put in place.

History

Cormorant populations were suppressed in the early 1900's as a result of extensive persecution by commercial fishermen in the Great Lakes area and by the utilization of eggs as human food. From the 1920's through the mid-1940's, populations began to rebound in the Great Lakes, New England and Canada. There is speculation that newly created reservoirs created islands, which were ideal for nesting, and this allowed for increased reproductive success. From that time until the early 1970's, Organo-chlorine pesticides caused eggshell thinning and extensive reproductive failure in cormorant populations. Some estimates in the Great Lakes area show in excess of 80% reduction in cormorant populations. During this time there were also cormorant reduction programs in Maine and Manitoba that used egg spraying techniques to reduce the populations further. Wisconsin (1972), Illinois (1979), and Michigan (1980) listed the cormorant as endangered. In Wisconsin special nesting structures were constructed to attempt to improve nesting successes. In 1972, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted protected status to the cormorant under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Dramatic population increases resulted from lower environmental burdens of persistent organo-chlorine pesticides as eggshell thinning vanished and reproductive success increased. The banning of DDT type chemicals was the principal factor which resulted in population increases for many birds at the top of the food chain. The same benefit that caused increases in bald eagle populations dramatically helped to increase cormorant populations. In recent years population numbers have surpassed levels that are tolerable, especially in the southeastern United States. From 1995 to 1998, the number of cormorants wintering in the catfish production region of the lower Mississippi River valley doubled and now exceeds 60,000 birds. In 1998, a few cormorants were

discovered breeding in Mississippi and, in 1999, 125 active cormorant nests were found in southwest Arkansas at Millwood Lake.

Problems

The impact of cormorants on the catfish industry is devastating and has been well documented. Seventy-seven percent of Mississippi producers, 66% of Arkansas producers and 50% of Alabama producers reported damage by cormorants. In a recent study, captive cormorants consumed 516 to 608 grams or about 10 catfish per day. A three-year study by USDA-Wildlife Services found that approximately half of the cormorant diet in the Mississippi Delta region was composed of channel catfish. Recent cost studies done at University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff indicate cormorant predation on catfish may reduce farm profits by more than \$400 per acre. Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana have a total of 158,500 acres of catfish ponds. Losses in these three states are over sixty million. Cormorants have a direct impact on sport fisheries. Although more studies are needed, extensive reports, observations, and anecdotal evidence indicates that the damage to sport fisheries, in general, far exceed estimates from just a few years ago. The sport fish damage also affects tourism and has a negative impact on the public's attitude about the protection of birds in general. The roosting activities of cormorants causes extensive damage to roost trees. Their droppings interfere with photosynthesis and coupled with the physical damage to the trees, usually results in killing valuable trees in wetland areas.

Management Recommendations

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should consider removing the double-crested cormorant from the list of protected birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. While considering that, the existing Double-crested Cormorant Depredation Order should be greatly expanded to include all problem situations and allow unlimited killing where necessary on both wintering grounds and nesting areas. Passage of the bill introduced by Congressman John McHugh (R-NY) and Colin Peterson (D-MN), HR-3118, which would establish a hunting season for cormorants, would be a valuable asset in obtaining the help of sportsmen in reducing the cormorant population. The Senate bill introduced by Senators Lincoln (D-AR) and Hutchinson (R-AR) which has been referred to the committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, S-2329, will give USDA-Wildlife Services needed authority to provide more assistance in dealing with cormorant populations. Comparable bills should be introduced in the House and efforts made to move towards passage of this legislation.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA-Wildlife Services should be directed to develop national population reduction strategies and implementation of these strategies as soon as possible. Reproductive success should be limited at all nesting areas in the Great Lakes region, and no nesting should be allowed

to begin or continue in the catfish production region of the south. The Environmental Impact Statement/Management Plan, now being developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, should be used, as a mechanism to accomplish needed population reductions. There is no room for further delays or political posturing. The damages resulting from cormorants are real, they are creating economic hardships on both the aquaculture industry and the economies associated with sport fishery resources. The archaic idea that protection is the only appropriate form of migratory bird management should be purged from those agencies with management responsibilities.

Cormorants have been captured by USDA-Wildlife Services personnel and outfitted with satellite/radio frequency backpacks in Alabama, Mississippi and Arkansas. This work began in November 1999. Location

data on collared birds will be tracked using satellites and will help establish migratory patterns, and make it easier to evaluate the effectiveness of roost dispersals and other management activities. Research and management activities by USDA-Wildlife Services need continued funding and support.

Summary

At this time, cormorant population numbers are far in excess of acceptable levels. Resulting losses to our natural sport fishery and to aquaculture producers is unacceptable. I ask the Congress of the United States to direct agencies that can correct these problems to do so.

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