



Quagga mussel threat puts focus on Lake Casitas

Tiny mollusks, big debate

By Zeke Barlow
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The story of fishing at Lake Casitas might best be told in Polaroid snapshots long faded by the sun.

Tacked onto a billboard of a lakeside bait shop is a wall of photos of young kids posing with their first catch, old men straining to hold up their 13-pound fish, and dozens of grins as wide as the mouths on the captured bass.

But these days, it's not just the record-breaking bass on fishermen's minds, but something much smaller and more menacing with the potential to quash prospects of future trophy snapshots.

Officials fear the invasive quagga mussel could infest the lake, not only changing the ecosystem of this storied reservoir, but also damaging the intricate infrastructure that provides water to many in western Ventura County.

In an effort to keep out the exotic mussel, the agency that runs the lake is wrestling with the idea of temporarily closing it to the roughly 30,000 outside boats that annually launch there. The fear is the mussel will attach itself to a boat transported from an infected lake to Lake Casitas, causing untold environmental and economic damage.

"This has a huge impact on the Ojai Valley," said Marc Mitrany, his gray-speckled hair windswept from a boat ride to one of his favorite fishing coves on the lake. The owner of the Ojai Angler fishing guide service fears a closure decision would affect many businesses that rely on fishermen's dollars. "No one is prepared for it."

Russ Baggerly, a board member of the Casitas Municipal Water District, has been leading the charge to examine effects the mussel could have on the lake. His fear is that mussels could clog the pipes and jeopardize the district's budget and the water supply, which is the board's first priority.

"That water resource is a lifeline for 70,000 people in our district. It can't be replaced," he said. "Bass fishermen can go anywhere they want to go fishing. We don't have a choice with that reservoir."

At a recent meeting on the issue, so many fishermen crowded the Casitas boardroom that they exceeded the limit allowed by the fire marshal. Another meeting is planned for next month, when a decision on banning outside boats might be made.

Breaching the barrier

In recent years, a line was drawn at the 100th meridian, dividing the western United States into a region where the invasive quagga mussel and closely related zebra mussel were not supposed to cross.

The mussels had already wreaked havoc across the East after they were brought into the Great Lakes in 1988 by a ship from the Ukraine.

The mussels can produce 1 million offspring a year and rapidly spread, altering ecosystems by eating away the bottom of the food chain. Over time, with fewer food sources, the makeup of a lake can change. Some native species might thrive and others falter. But the larger concern to water agencies is the mussel's ability to virtually envelop pipes and infrastructure, dramatically increasing costs as expensive chemicals and maintenance are needed to keep the mussels in check.

On Jan. 9, 2007, the imaginary barrier was breached when a worker found a mussel attached to a cable at Nevada's Lake Mead.

Over the next few weeks, Bryan Moore, a biologist with the National Park Service, started diving around the lake. At first he found a few mussels, then 100, then 200.

"Now there are too many to count," he said.

It's widely believed the mussels got to the lake on the hull of a boat brought there from the East. Moore said the lake could have been infected for years before the first mussel was found.

Soon after the Lake Mead inspections, quagga mussels were found downstream in lakes Havasu and Mohave, then in the Colorado River Aqueduct, a major source of water for Southern California. In August, a series of reservoirs in San Diego that get water via the aqueduct was found to be infected.

It's believed the microscopic larvae, called veligers, moved down the pipes. To date, only lakes on the aqueduct system have become infected.

On the day quaggas were found at Lake Dixon in Escondido, nearby Lake Wohlford, which is not on the aqueduct, closed to outside boats. Lake Wohlford has a fraction of the fishing traffic of Lake Casitas.

Other agencies started scrambling, too.

The city of San Diego started to come up with an anti-mussel plan and predicts millions will be spent. The Southern Nevada Water Authority has spent \$1,000 a day on chemicals that kill the mussels and foresees spending millions more.

But for all the time and money that have gone into fighting them, some say most people aren't paying enough attention to the quagga problem.

"This is the biggest freshwater invasion in the western United States. It seems remarkable how little attention is being paid to this," said Andy Cohen, chairman of the California scientific advisory panel dealing with quaggas. "These mussels have transformed the ecology of some of the largest water bodies on Earth. We have every reason to believe there is going to be an impact on Western aquatic ecosystems that is unprecedented."

But Cohen and others think that talk of limiting access to Lake Casitas, one of the most popular trophy bass lakes in the nation, might be what finally gets people's attention.

Is education enough?

Ron Cervenka ordered 10,000 bumper stickers he hopes will help keep the mussels at bay and Lake Casitas open. After all, this is the lake where a near-world record, 21-pound 3-ounce bass was caught.

A member of the Casitas Lake advisory board who runs some of the more than 30 tournaments at the lake every year, Cervenka is doing everything he can to convince the board that bass fishermen are not

going to transport quagga mussels to the lake. The stickers admonish fishermen to make sure their boats are clean and dry before entering or leaving the lake.

The California Department of Fish and Game this year sent letters to the more than 1 million registered boaters warning them of the mussel. Cervenka and other fishermen said the educational campaign will work as boaters take care of the lakes they love.

An adult mussel can live about five days out of water. What that means depends on where you stand in the argument. Fish and Game biologist Mike Giusti said it's likely that hot desert air would kill any mussel between trips to and from lakes.

Cohen, however, said the mussel's ability to survive during transport should not be underestimated. He pointed out that the mussel somehow got across the U.S. to Lake Mead.

Lake Casitas recently started inspecting every boat that comes into the lake and asks the fishermen where their vessels have been.

But Jay Cowan, a ranger superintendent with the city of Escondido, questions how much inspections help. He said when he went through a training exercise with other rangers, where they had to find a tiny sticker on a boat that represented a quagga mussel, every ranger missed at least one.

Cohen said inspections were done at Lake Mead, but boats checked later at agricultural inspection stations had mussels attached to the hulls.

Lake Casitas is looking into investing in a hot-water cleaning station that would blast boats before they enter the water, which Cohen and others said could be effective if used by professionals. But it costs as much as \$300,000.

Fishermen argue that birds could also transport the mussel to lakes. While Cohen said that's feasible, it's never been proven. He noted it took decades for water bodies in the eastern United States that weren't connected to infested ones to become infected with mussels.

'A wake-up call'

Dana Wisheart, general manager of the United Water Conservation District, which runs Lake Piru, is carefully watching what happens at Lake Casitas.

Cohen said Casitas might be the first popular lake in the state to address the issue head-on.

That's fine with Baggerly. He says too little direction is coming from state and federal agencies.

"We really do have an incredible threat to our water resources," he said. "You can see that even the idea of temporary closure of a favorite bass-fishing facility gets people's attention this is a wake-up call."

Fishermen fear a domino effect of one lake after another closing if Lake Casitas is shut down. Mitrany, the fishing guide, said the district should take its time making a decision and think about the economic consequences.

"We'll be impacted with no time to prepare," he said.

Down the street from the lake, the Corner Market does about twice as much business during the summer fishing season, selling cold beer and live bait, said clerk Andre Fredrichsen.

At the Oak View Shell, owner Al Buczkowski said he fills up about 20 boat tanks a day during the summer.

The district is looking into the economic impact of a closure, as is the Ojai Chamber of Commerce.

Tom Nalepa knows well the impacts of a mussel infestation. The research biologist with the Great Lakes Environmental Research Lab was one of the first to examine the changes the zebra mussel could bring. Two decades later, he's still studying the environmental changes.

He said people in the Midwest looked into closing lakes to outside boats, but the issue was so hotly contested it rarely happened. And once mussels are in a region, it's hard to contain them, he said.

"It's very difficult to stop the spread," he said. "They spread in so many different ways.

"You are in for some interesting times," he said of Southern California. "Be prepared."



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