

US states look to diners to curb blue catfish problem

'I think we're on the verge of really opening up a good market for that product' -- Mike Hutt, Virginia Marine Products Board

By [Barb Dean-Simmons](#) | May 28, 2024 16:40 BST

An invasive fish that's become a problem in rivers in two US states is becoming a sales opportunity for fishermen and fishing companies.

Wild blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*) — introduced to Virginia and Maryland in the 1970s for the sports fishing industry — have increased to the point that they now account for as much as 80% of all fish species in some river systems.

"It's eating our crab, striped bass, herring and other finfish," Mike Hutt, executive director of the Virginia Marine Products Board (VMPB), told *Undercurrent News* at Seafood Expo Global (SEG), in Barcelona, Spain, in April.

"They have taken over, and they will continue to take over if we don't do something about it," said Hutt, who was representing the Southern US Trade Association on Seafood (SOUSA) at SEG.

Population up 500% in 10 years





📷 Mike Hutt, executive director of the Virginia Marine Products Board. Photo by Barb Dean-Simmons

Blue catfish were initially introduced by Virginia's Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) into the James and Rappahannock Rivers in 1974. More were released into the York River watershed in 1985, with about 300,000 blues released over those 11 years.

At the time, populations of striped bass — a prized trophy fish for sports fishermen — were declining throughout the Atlantic. Blue catfish were meant to replace them.

It was originally thought that the blue catfish would remain confined to the rivers where they were introduced and would not venture beyond the salty boundary of Chesapeake Bay. However, the fish adapted to the salt water and swam further.

By the late 1980s, they appeared in the Potomac River, eventually

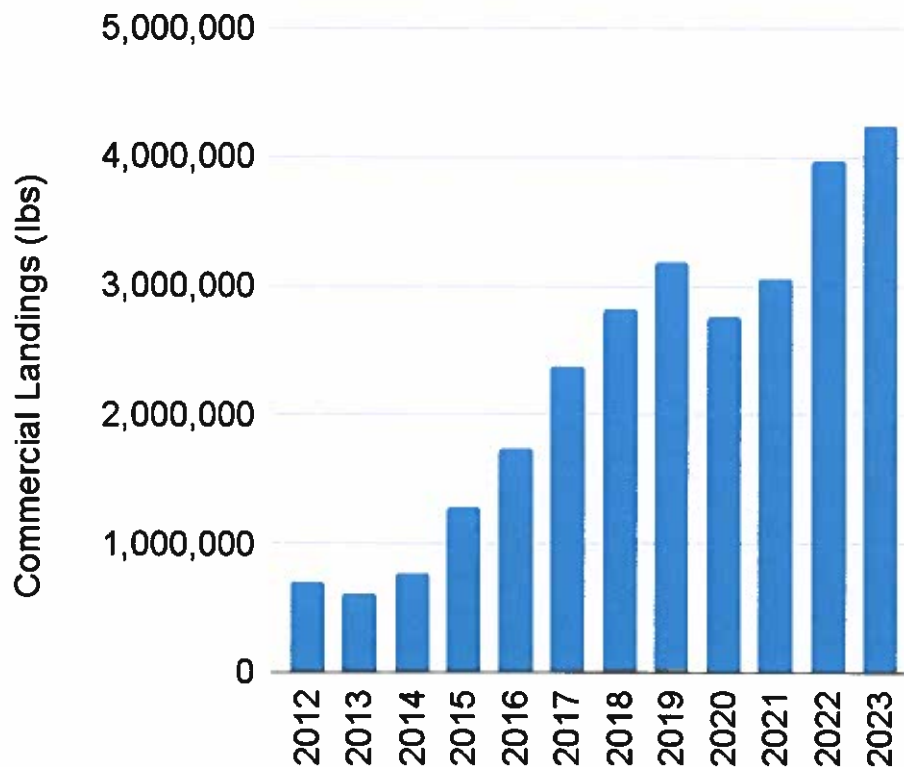



moving on to the Nanticoke and Patuxent Rivers.

Both Virginia and Maryland have classed the blues as an invasive species.

While there isn't extensive data on the number of blue catfish in these states' rivers, Maryland's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) uses harvest data as a measure. In the Potomac River and other Maryland waters, commercial landings of blue catfish skyrocketed from 609,525 pounds in 2013 to 4.2 million pounds in 2023, an increase of more than 500%, the DNR notes on its website.

Surveys of the James and Rappahannock rivers in Virginia show that blue catfish comprise about 75% of the total fish biomass. Three out of every four lbs of fish biomass is blue catfish.



 Data from Maryland Department of Natural Resources show how commercial harvests of blue catfish have increased since 2012. Screenshot from DNR website.

Solving the blue catfish problem with consumer appetite

Hutt believes one of the best solutions to the blue catfish problem is putting more of them on dinner tables. Finding markets for the fish allows commercial fishermen to at least make some income while trying to bring the rivers back to balance, Hutt pointed out.

"We've got commercial fishermen behind it, knowing that it provides jobs and money for fear and fuel," he said, adding that as markets for the blue catfish grow, it will also create opportunities for packaging and distribution companies.

"It could be a big industry, and we are working to build it," he said.

Fortunately, blue catfish has an excellent flavor, thanks to its diet of other seafood, Hutt added.

Unlike other catfish that forage for food on muddy bottoms, blue catfish grab their food throughout the water column, feeding on crab, American eel, herring, seabass and whatever else they can find.

"It tastes like what it feeds on," Hutt said.

Last year, fishermen in Virginia harvested 3m lbs of blue catfish from state rivers, but "the government feels that's not even putting a dent in the stock because the biomass is steadily growing," he said.

Currently, most blue catfish is sold fresh in the US domestic market to some grocery stores, restaurants and independent retailers, he said.





📷 Blue catfish at a seafood market in Jessup, Maryland. Photograph by Jason Huffman.

"But we need to get it to club stores, where you can sell the higher volumes in individual quick-frozen packs," said Hutt.

For the past two years, the VMPB has also been seeking markets further afield, featuring the blue catfish in its booth at seafood expos like the SEG.

"It's been very well received," said Hutt, adding: "I think we're on the verge of really opening up a good market for that product."

Virginia created a grant program last year to support blue catfish processing infrastructure. The original quest was for \$4m, but the budget was slashed to \$250,000 just before the bill was adopted, reported *Chesapeake Bay Magazine*.

In February, Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin announced that [Sea Farms Inc. of Hayes, Virginia](#), would get a repayable grant of \$250,000 to buy a blast freezing system and expand freezer storage capacity to handle blue catfish.

