



*Fisheries Display at the IL State Fair in Springfield, circa 1955*

@ORC

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## Fish, Fairs, and Fun

By Dan Stephenson, Fisheries Division

For more than 60 years the Division of Fisheries has had a live fish display at the State Fair in Springfield. A tradition that has carried through year after year and even expanded over the years.

In the early years of the live display the fish were housed in concrete ponds and aquariums on the walls, in what is now the Arts and Craft building. Roughly 40 years ago the display was moved to an area on the northwest corner of the fairgrounds which became known as Conservation World. Under one of the tents, fairgoers will find two 18' diameter swimming pools and 5 aquariums filled with live fish from around the state.

The program has expanded in recent years. The Division of Fisheries now offers many other activities. On first entering Conservation World, fair attendees are welcomed at the "Touch a Fish" station where live

crawdads, fish and turtles are displayed. Each year the "Touch a Fish" station has 25,000-30,000 excited kids (of all ages) hold or touch one of these creatures, many for the first time.

Next as you stroll down the path of Conservation World, you will find the urban fishing tent. Here, fishing clinics are presented six different times during the day to an average of 30 kids per clinic. Over the 10 day course of the state fair, approximately 1,800 young people, ages 8 and up, are given instruction on how to tie line knots and fish with fishing equipment. They are also taught aquatic education and fishing ethics. After the kids have finished the clinic they are allowed to fish in a pond adjacent to the tent. The small pond is about 3 feet deep and holds thousands of hungry 4"-6" hybrid sunfish that our young anglers can easily catch. Kids have a blast at the clinic.



Dan Stephenson earned both his B.S. and M.S. in Zoology from EIU graduating in May 1979. He began work on contract with the Department in 1979, then full-time in 1980 as a Life Science Career Trainee in Region 5. In 1982, Dan assumed the district fisheries biologist position in Petersburg. At the beginning of 2013, he became the Assistant Chief of Fisheries Jan. 2013 and three year later, Dan serves as the Chief of Fisheries

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*Ann Holtrop, IDNR, holds a sunfish for a young fairgoer to touch*

As the fair goer travels along the sidewalk winding through Conservation World they eventually end up at the Fisheries tent where two swimming pools can be found along with 5 large aquariums, all holding live fish of numerous species collected by Division staff a day or so before the Fair begins. In the large pools, huge flathead and blue catfish and, in recent years, a large (4 foot long) alligator gar can also be seen.

In the tent, a fisheries biologist is available to answer fishing and pond management questions from the general public and pond owners. You will also find a large display about invasive aquatic species in Illinois, in particular Asian carp, and staff to answer questions related to these “bad guys”. The fisheries division has also put together an archery fishing display and young people can actually practice archery fishing in the nearby pond, shooting at underwater fish decoys. Another very popular display within the tent is the “Whack a Mussel”, designed from the “Whack a Mole” electronic game. Here, fair attendees wear out the padded mallet beating up invasive zebra mussels

Out on the dock of the large pond younger children (under age 8) can fish for an hour three times each day. The pond has many fish species that all seem to bite at one time or another. Large channel catfish, bass, crappie and bluegill are caught there.

Our last fishing stop is at the pond just west of the IDNR building where four times each day fairgoers can sit in an expertly taught fly fishing clinic, learning the basics of that wonderful facet of fly fishing.



*A family observes several large flathead catfish in one of the large pools in the Fisheries tent at the State Fair in Springfield*



*A pond in Conservation World, near the Fisheries Division tent, offers youngsters a chance to catch a fish or two.*

The nearby pond is stocked with 4-5 pound large and smallmouth bass that are retired each year from our hatchery. These fish, along with the large channel catfish and bluegill provide quite a fishing experience for all who care to try.

At the Du Quoin State Fair in southern Illinois fairgoers can also experience some of the fun found at the Springfield State Fair. On weekends, our young anglers can catch 4”-6” hybrid sunfish in a small 16’ x 16’ pool and all can practice casting at floating hula hoops in the large pond next to the Fisheries tent. In addition, fisheries biologists are on hand to answer questions about fishing in local lakes and to offer advice about proper pond management to our private pond owners.



*An excited youngster shows off a sunfish he caught at the IL State Fair in Springfield.*

At that fair we have a large trailer sporting fishing equipment, mounted fish displays and information about the history of fishing. Fairgoers of all ages pass through this trailer learning all it has to offer. And, as with the Springfield fair, fishing instruction is given at the fishing clinics offered multiple times each day.

These two efforts require hundreds of man-hours to put together. The Fisheries Division has done it for decades and has established a long-standing tradition that is greatly enjoyed and appreciated by those attending the fairs. We look forward to this every year.

One final note, the Division has participated in the Twilight Parade for the past two years with a “float” of an electrofishing boat pulled behind one of our trucks. Division staff and volunteers hand out Urban Fishing rulers and Stop Invasive Species bobbers along the parade course.



*In 2015, the electro fishing boat is pulled by a fisheries truck for fairgoers to see.*