

Taking action to save SA's precious indigenous fishes



Habitat destruction, competition and predation by alien fish species threaten the survival of a number of indigenous freshwater fish in South Africa. One of the success stories in freshwater resources conservation is the Yellowfish Working Group (YWG). Article compiled by Deidré West.

Established in 1997, the YWG is a shared responsibility between anglers and conservationists. The group is managed by the Federation of Southern African Flyfishers (FOSAF), which also finances its running costs while underwriting the costs of its projects. Its mission is to 'promote the

long-term conservation needs of yellowfish as a flagship group within their natural habitats through sustainable utilisation practices and as a means to create an awareness of their conservation with the relevant decision-makers.'

Basically, the YWG is an 'interest group' comprised of people concerned about the conservation status of the nine species of indigenous yellowfish. Involvement is exclusively on a voluntary basis. Since the establishment of the YWG, fly-fishing resources have been virtually doubled, and the group has continued to be an excellent example of what cooperation between conservationists and recreational anglers can achieve.

But what makes yellowfish and their survival so important? Yellowfish belong to the large cyprinid family, and are the largest, scaled freshwater fish in South Africa. Six of the nine species (genus *Labeobarbus*) are true yellowfishes, while the other three species (genus *Barbus*) are related species.

Yellowfish species are sensitive to habitat degradation and environmental change, and are consequently becoming scarce in many of the rivers in which they naturally occur. Three of the nine species are already classified as threatened or vulnerable.

Recently, the YWG has shifted its focus from the need to popularise flyfishing for yellows in a sustainable

manner to placing a greater emphasis on research and the need to combat the real threats to habitat degradation and pollution. An increasing threat is that of hybridisation due to the increasing demand for yellowfish for stocking purposes, mainly because it has become such a sought-after angling fish.

In response the YWG has undertaken a genetic study, starting with work on the two species occurring in the Orange-Vaal system. In collaboration with the Water Research Commission, the group has also published the *State of the Yellowfishes of South Africa 2007* (WRC Report No. TT 302/07). This report can be downloaded directly from the WRC website or ordered in hard copy at Email: orders@wrc.org.za.

The YWG hosts an annual conference during which aquatic scientists and ichthyologists from across the country gather to present their research. This year, the conference will be held at the Black Mountain Leisure and Conference Centre, in the Free State, on 22 June, a day before the conference of the Southern African Society of Aquatic Scientists (SASAQs), as many members of the YWG are also members of SASAQs. To enquiry about the conference contact Leon Barkhuizen at Email: barkhl@dttea.fs.gov.za. Those interested in supporting the YWG can contact the secretary, Peter Arderne at Tel: (011) 882-3051 or Email: mwardern@mweb.co.za. □

