

ASMFC Alternative Management Plan for River Herring for Georgia

Submitted by

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Introduction:

Historical fisheries for river herring (e.g. blueback herring, etc.) in the open waters of Georgia are negligible. The purpose of Georgia's alternative management plan for river herring is to allow waters to remain open. This plan is submitted to fulfill requirements of Amendment 3 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Shad and River Herring (River Herring Management).

Management of river herring in Georgia is shared between the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' (GADNR) Wildlife Resources Division's Fisheries Management Section (FMS) and GADNR's Coastal Resources Division (CRD). The major rivers in Georgia utilized by fish stocks include the Savannah, Ogeechee, Altamaha (formed by the Oconee and Ocmulgee rivers), Satilla, and St. Mary's rivers. Commercial fishing for river herring in these rivers is not allowed, and no historical landings exist. Recreationally, river herring are unregulated in Georgia, and GADNR is unaware of recreational effort.

Georgia's Commercial River Herring Fishery and Landings

There are no recorded landings of river herring from Georgia. Under this Alternative Management Plan, it is proposed that commercial fishing for river herring remain closed.

Georgia's Recreational River Herring Fishery

Though the GADNR is unaware of any directed recreational fishing for river herring, their harvest is unregulated. Numerous recreational creel surveys funded by the NMFS (e.g. MRIP) or GADNR (e.g. Altamaha, Ogeechee, and Satilla river creel surveys) show no harvest or directed effort for river herring. The GADNR doesn't have current recreational creel survey data for the St. Mary's river, but anecdotal creel information from anglers on the river indicates no evidence or reports of anglers incidentally catching river herring.

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

The absence of a commercial fishery for river herring in Georgia prevents the establishment of commercial fishery-dependent indices for the species. Recreationally, fishery-dependent data collection is done through creel surveys. However, MRIP surveys (year-round) and GADNR creel surveys conducted annually on the Altamaha River (from April – November; Fig. 1) and every 5 years on the Ogeechee River have found zero recreational harvest of river herring. It is anticipated that all current creel surveys (MRIP, GADNR) will continue into the foreseeable future.

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

GADNR conducts multiple fishery-independent monitoring efforts that may land river herring. These efforts involve two gear types. In the Savannah River, a fishery-independent effort utilizing electrofishing gear near the New Savannah Bluff Lock and Dam has been done annually since 2010 to assess American shad (Fig. 2). This survey is performed February through June. In the ten years that this survey has been conducted, only three river herring have been observed during electrofishing efforts, further supporting the notion that river herring abundance in the river is extremely low. Similarly, an electrofishing survey targeting American shad in the Ogeechee River (conducted between February and June) has yielded no river herring. Additional electrofishing efforts conducted annually by the GADNR include those targeting multiple species of scale fish in the Altamaha, Satilla, and St. Mary's rivers. These standardized surveys entail 1-hour fishing efforts conducted at 10-12 sites within each river (Fig. 3 - 5). Again, no river herring have been observed in any of these efforts thus far.

A second gear type used in fishery-independent surveys are seines. As part of the American shad FMP for Georgia, GADNR estimates juvenile American shad abundance annually utilizing a 50-ft seine on the Altamaha, Ogeechee, and Savannah rivers. Seine mesh size ($1/4$ inch) and site locations are standardized. GADNR staff annually sample 3-6 sites/river 1-2 times a month from July through September. Incidental captures of river herring (e.g. blueback herring) do occur and are recorded. Since 2011, over 13,300 juvenile American shad have been captured in 260 seine hauls. By comparison, 267 juvenile blueback herring were captured in these same hauls. Annual geomean calculations for blueback herring continually remain well below one fish/haul. Consequently, creating a sustainability benchmark based on such low abundance would be ineffective and difficult at best. This difficulty is further exacerbated by the fact that seine gear is affected by river levels, and the potential for data to not be collected during high-water periods would further inhibit the use of this data for management benchmarks and triggers.

Management Recommendation

The TC has recommended that, in the absence of a sustainable fishery management plan for river herring, the GADNR consider: A) establishing a catch-and-release only fishery; or B) pursue an Alternative Management Plan for the species. Indications are that populations of river herring in Georgia have historically been low, and no fisheries for the species (commercial or recreational) have been identified. Furthermore, in Table 15 of Amendment 2 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Shad and River Herring, it is stated that “there are currently no known river herring populations in Georgia. Should populations be established, the Management Board has the authority to require a fisheries independent monitoring program be implemented” (ASMFC website). Because river herring are considered functionally absent in Georgia rivers, it would be impossible to develop a sustainable fishing plan with any credible metrics. A modification of Georgia state law to prohibit the harvest of river herring will result in no demonstrable conservation benefit, thus we do not consider a catch-and-release only fishery desirable.

In an effort to examine herring abundance in our state waters, the GADNR will continue fishery-independent *Alosid* monitoring via electrofishing on the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers, along with standardized sampling efforts via electrofishing on the Altamaha, Satilla, and St. Mary’s rivers. In an effort to monitor the directed recreational harvest of various species, including herring, in Georgia, the GADNR proposes to continue the use of fishery-dependent creel surveys. These include fishery-dependent creel samplings conducted by MRIP coastwide and GADNR river-specific efforts.

GADNR plans to continue fishery-dependent and -independent monitoring for the foreseeable future. Using all available creel data (MRIP, GADNR), we propose that should we encounter a positive event of a harvest in a single year we will examine the specifics of that harvest and consider if additional data collection efforts are warranted. In the event that creel surveys indicate positive harvest of river herring for three consecutive years, GADNR will take the necessary steps to ensure sustainability for that river system. These steps will include the pursuit of establishing a formal sustainable fishery management plan or pursuit of a regulatory change (e.g. catch and release, closure of river, etc.), if deemed necessary.

Annual Reporting

In an effort to further identify the current status of river herring in Georgia, we propose to present the results of annual fishery-independent (e.g. electrofishing surveys) and fishery-dependent (e.g. creel surveys) data in the annual Shad and River Herring Compliance Report. Such results may be presented in written, tabular, or graphical form. The reporting of this data should provide additional insight into the status of river herring abundance in Georgia.

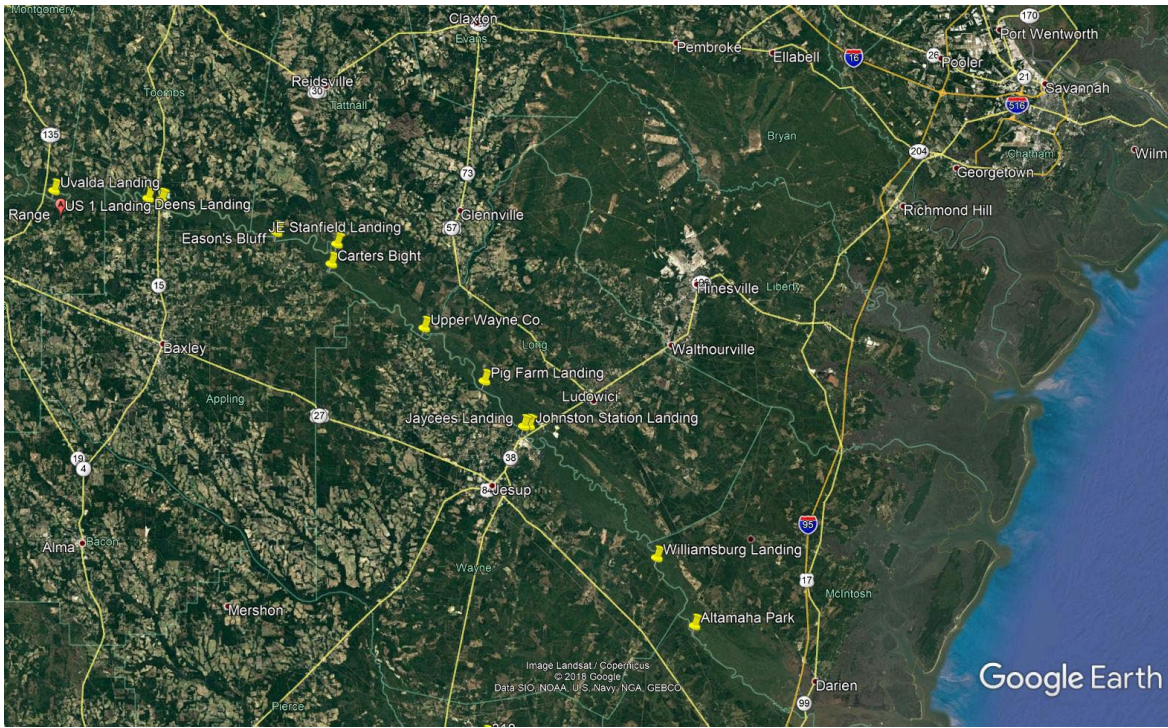


Figure 1. GADNR creel sites on the Altamaha River

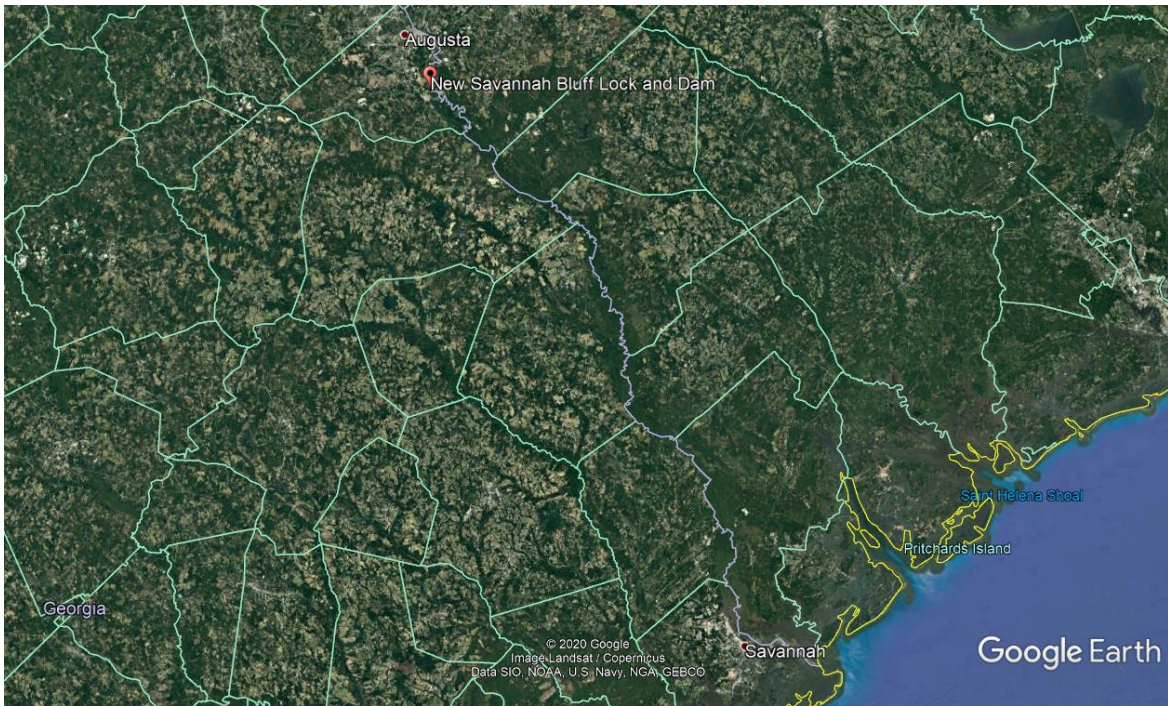


Figure 2. GADNR *Alosid* electrofishing site on the Savannah River

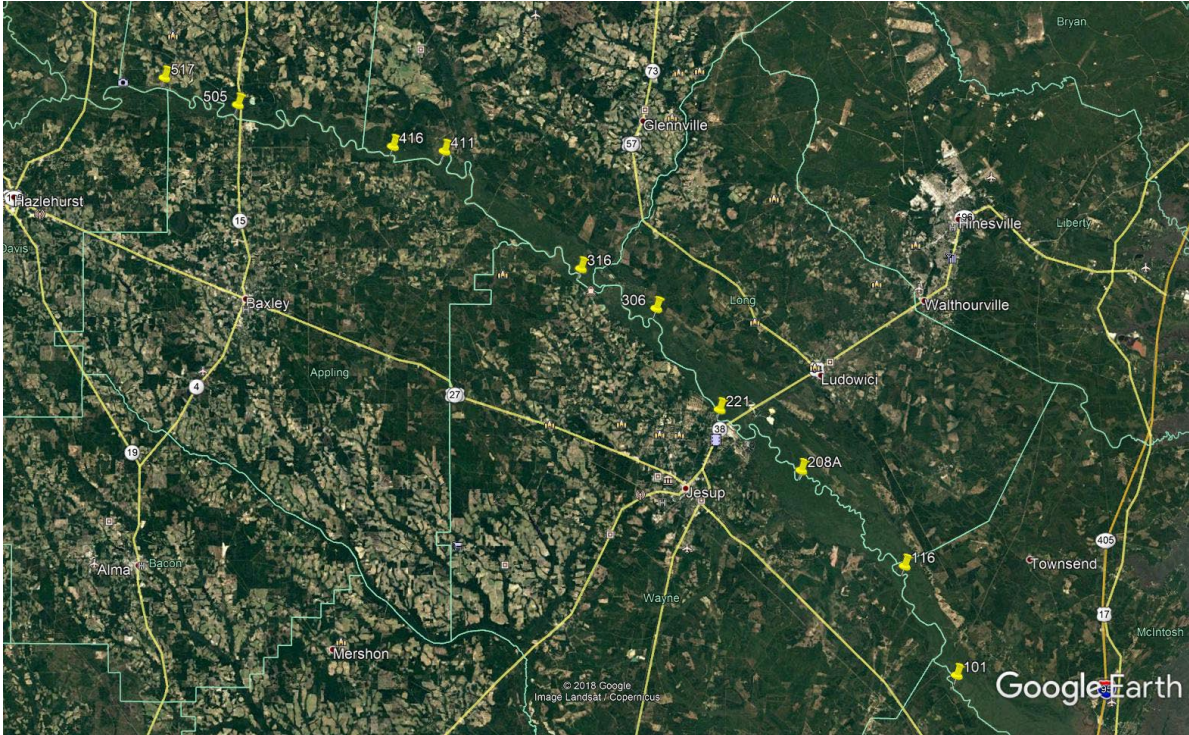


Figure 3. Standardized sampling sites on the Altamaha River

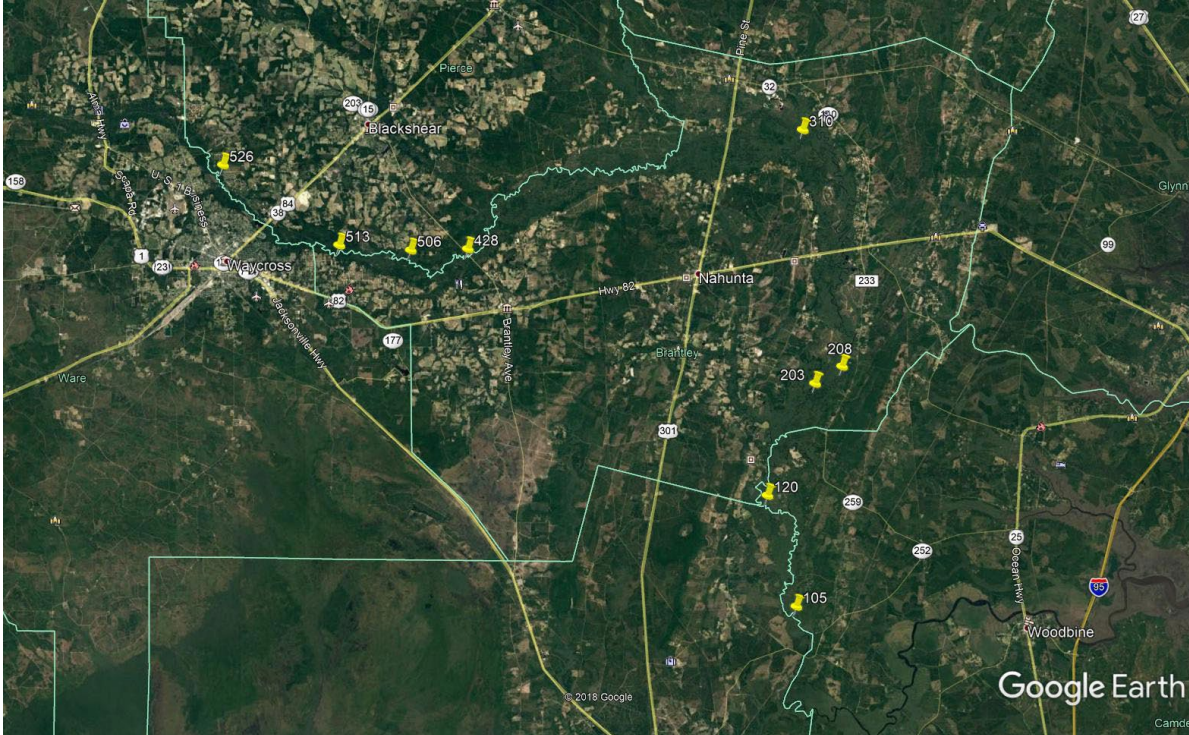


Figure 4. Standardized sampling sites on the Satilla River

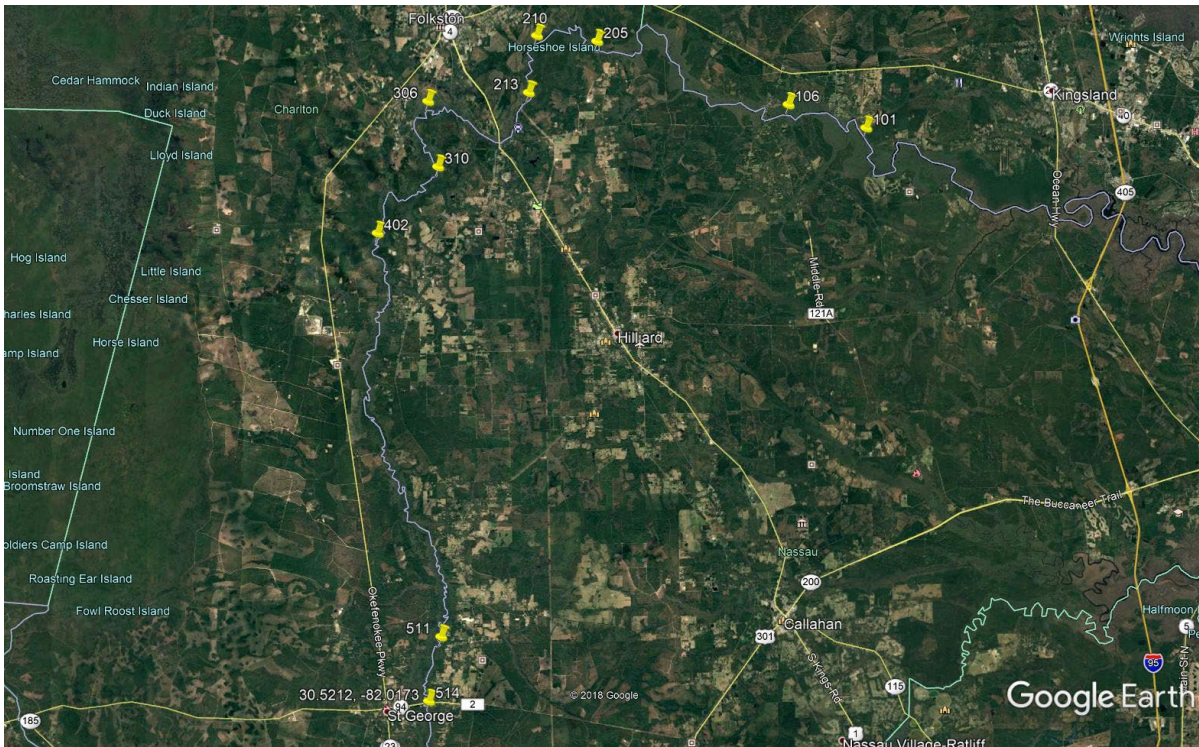


Figure 5. Standardized sampling sites on the St. Mary's River