

Hello everyone, and welcome. My name is Allyse Ferrara and I am the chair of this session's organizing committee. I am an assistant professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, which is located approximately 45 minutes southwest of New Orleans.

Welcome to Louisiana! For those of you that are not American citizens, Welcome to the United States. New Orleans is a terrific place to hold this session. First of all, it's carnival season. If you will be New Orleans this Saturday, you can watch one of our discussion panel members participate in the politically incorrect Krewe de Vieux Mardi Gras parade on Saturday evening. If you need restaurant recommendations or recommendations of things to do and see, please see me, Quenton Fontenot, Gary LaFleur, Karla Johanning, or John McLachlan. The second reason New Orleans is such an appropriate venue for this session is that Louisiana, particularly south Louisiana has a lot of gar. We have populations of alligator gar, spotted gar, longnose gar, and shortnose gar in the more northern areas of the state.

These gar populations support commercial and recreational fisheries as well as local artisans that create handmade jewelry and crafts from gar scales and artists that incorporate garfish into various media such as paintings, carvings, and music. Both alligator gar and spotted gar are frequently sold in local fish markets. Gar may be purchased as filets or in pre-made patties. You may also find live spotted gar for sale. This session's speakers were invited to present their research and to describe their involvement with garfish resources. We have speakers from both the United States and Mexico that will be presenting on topics ranging from gar culture to gar biology and ecology to physiology to the concerns of bowanglers that target alligator gar. We will also have a few posters on display in this room throughout the session. After the invited presentations we will have a panel discussion.

I would like to thank our sponsors whose contributions allowed us to pay for this session's English to Spanish and Spanish to English translation booth. Contributions from the Bowfishing Association of America (BAA), Nicholls State University Department of Biological Sciences, and the Center for Bioenvironmental Research at Tulane and Xavier Universities provided funding for the translation booth. Thank you so very much for allowing us to accommodate Spanish and English speaking speakers and audience members. Unfortunately, many of us are not bilingual. Therefore, whenever possible, we should strive to accommodate both English and Spanish speakers and readers. The language barrier can be problematic for gar researchers that only speak one language because the majority of gar research is published in one language and often times in grey literature such as agency reports, regional journals, or theses or dissertations that are difficult to obtain. Until recently, the only publications available on gar culture were in Spanish and the majority of publications on gar biology and ecology were in English. To facilitate multidisciplinary restocking projects and international collaborative efforts, we must communicate across or through the language barrier. I would also like to thank the World Aquaculture Society for support of this session. Many thanks go to Mr. John Cooksey, meeting organizer for the World Aquaculture Society. Mr. Cooksey helped with and accommodated the many format changes that occurred during the planning of this session.

I would also like to thank members of this session's organizing committee for their guidance and wisdom during the planning of this session.

I extend my deepest appreciation to the following individuals who have agreed to serve on this session's discussion panel which will be held after the presentations: Dr. Wilfrido Contreras, myself, Dr. Karla Johanning, Dr. Brian Kreiser, Dr. John McLachlan, and Dr. Roberto Mendoza are panel members. Dr. Quenton Fontenot will serve as the panel's moderator. Finally, I would like to thank three individuals whose assistance is critical to the smooth running of this session. We at Nicholls State are proud to have these three individuals in our graduate program: Mr. Perry Boudreaux, the session's moderator, and Mr. Chris Bonvillain and Mr. Johnathan Davis who will be handling computers and video equipment.

Now I would like to talk about the tasks the discussion panel will tackle later on today. The first item for the discussion panel is the newly formed International Network for Lepisostid Research.

Dr. Wilfrido Contreras, the Network's creator, has obtained funding from the Mexican Office of Education to create the Network. Future plans for the network and the inclusion of biologists from throughout the historical range of Lepisostids will be discussed later today. Also, the Network logo is a work in progress. Please expect future improvements.

Of particular interest is the inclusion of biologists from Cuba, the home of the Cuban gar, biologists from Central America, and biologists from the northern extent of the range of Lepisostids, the Midwestern US and southern Canada.

Those of us that study and manage garfish suffer from an image problem, at least in the United States. Garfish are not glamorous like bluefin tuna and swordfish. Many people still think of gar as worthless, slimy, toothy, man-eating beasts. We need to change these perceptions. Let me steal a little thunder from the Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society... In 1996 the Chapter held a workshop entitled "How to Make Fish as Popular as Dinosaurs". From what I can gather the consensus of the two day workshop was to introduce kids to fishing and to take them fishing. So...How do we make garfish as appealing and as interesting as dinosaurs? We don't necessarily have to take a kid fishing for gar but we can take them to see garfish in an aquarium or to see the fish surfacing to air breathe in their native habitats. While viewing the garfish, we can tell the child just how interesting and unique these fishes are. Another idea, which I hope Dr. Wilfrido Contreras will speak about during the panel discussion, is to allow children to raise and release a hatchery produced gar.

Luckily, many of the antiquated rules that once prevented anglers from releasing live gar and encouraged the slaughter of gars have been eliminated. These rules helped to perpetuate misunderstandings of gar behavior, ecological roles, and feeding habits. Unfortunately in many states, these rules have been replaced with needed bag limits or gar species in many areas have been designated as threatened or as species of concern due in most part to habitat modifications and to a lesser degree to overharvest. Garfish are an amazing, unique group of relatively long-lived fishes. We are only beginning to understand the roles these fishes play in aquatic environments and to identify critical habitats.

Identifying gaps in our knowledge of gar biology goes hand-in-hand with assigning research priorities. We must identify critical habitats and we must understand the genetic make-up of gar

populations before we can safely and successfully re-introduce gar into areas where they have been extirpated or into areas where populations have declined. A few state agencies in the US that do not already have harvest regulations for alligator gar are considering bag limits or length limits for alligator gar. Some of these US agencies are also looking at the feasibility of stocking hatchery raised alligator gar. These agencies and the biologists that will be working on these projects must be made aware of the similar efforts that have and are being conducted in Mexico.

We should work together, across basins and across disciplines, to increase our chances of obtaining the funds that are needed to conduct projects that target our research priorities.

We should also work with users of garfish resources. Through these partnerships we can improve public perceptions and understanding of the gars and we can better understand patterns of resource use. Scholarships such as the \$600 graduate student competitive grant offered by the Native Fish Conservancy and the Oklahoma Fish Stickers bowfishing organization are a wonderful way to increase angler understanding of garfish biology and to increase awareness of garfish research. Although small grants and scholarships do not provide enough money to conduct a research project and to support a graduate student, these monetary awards bring recognition to the students and to their research.

Finally, I will post this session's poster abstracts and notes from the session's discussion panel on the Bayosphere Lab webpage. We have two spreadsheets linked to the webpage that allow anglers to determine the estimated weight or age of alligator gar if the total length of the fish is known. If you have other gar related items or links to webpages you would like us to post on the Bayosphere Lab webpage we will be more than happy to do so.

Once again, let me welcome you to the United States, to Louisiana, and to this session. I hope to see all of you and many more gar biologists, gar anglers, and gar lovers at future meetings.