

## It's about the habitat – Lake Panasoffkee

By Bob Wattendorf and Marty Hale,  
Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

So you love nature and you love to fish. But sometimes you might wonder why you have to buy a fishing license or where your tax monies go. Are they really worth it, especially in this harsh economic climate?

If you've followed this column or spoken to a biologist, you've probably heard that fisheries management includes habitat management, people management and fish management. However, in the end, it's about the habitat. Without good water quality, appropriate water levels, the



*Aerial view of Lake Panasoffkee, in Sumter County. Photos courtesy The Lake Panasoffkee Restoration Council.*

right substrate (lake-bottom soils) and aquatic vegetation or other places where fish want to live and feed, it is impossible to maintain a fishery.

Central Florida's Lake Panasoffkee is an excellent example of why these elements are vital and how your dollars are spent to improve our natural resources, in ways that couldn't possibly happen without you. The Lake Panasoffkee Restoration Council recently submitted a successful-completion report to the Legislature documenting a six-year, multimillion-dollar, multi-agency cooperative project.

Lake Panasoffkee, designated an Outstanding Florida Water, is a 4,460-acre Fish Management Area in Sumter County, near Interstate 75. In the 1950s, it was one of the state's best places to fish, with 15 active fish camps. However, by 1998, 12 of those camps had closed. A major reason was that the water level was no longer fluctuating allowing the lake to naturally cleanse itself, development in the watershed and nonnative plants had decimated the habitat and with it the lake's ability to sustain a fishery.

In 1998, the lake was designated as one of the Surface Water Improvement and Management Act's priority lakes, and planning for its restoration began. With so many millions of dollars at stake (\$28.3 million over 10 years), careful planning and interagency cooperation were essential. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) contributed about \$2.3 million of that amount and ensured that fish and wildlife concerns were addressed, as well as benefits for recreational users. The focus was on shoreline restoration, sediment control and removal, exotic species management, floating vegetation removal, navigation, water quality and specific fish habitat improvements.

A four-step restoration program started in 2003 and wrapped up in 2008:

First, a refined, pilot dredging technique restored public access and re-established a navigation channel at Coleman Landing.

Next, dredging removed more than 3 million cubic yards of sediment to create 765 acres of hard-bottom area suitable for native vegetation and native fish spawning, especially around historic spawning sites near Grassy and Shell points. The effort also enhanced recreational access, navigation and fish populations.



*Dredging removes bottom muck allowing rooted plants to grow and more successful fish spawning.*

After that, dredging another 4.9 million cubic yards of muck from the east side of Panasoffkee exposed 979 acres of healthy lake bottom.

Finally, to improve access and reduce the reintroduction of sediments and exotic plants into the lake, 41 residential canals

were dredged.

Submerged aquatic vegetation is critical to healthy Florida lakes because it acts as a buffer against shoreline erosion, reduces sedimentation, cleanses the water and provides vital fish and wildlife habitat. By 2007, there was a dramatic improvement in the vegetation community. It not only maintained the 60-percent-minimal goal, it exceeded the goal and achieved 70-percent coverage.

Recent electrofishing samples have shown large numbers of threadfin shad (excellent bass and speckled perch forage) and largemouth bass in the 1- to 3-pound range with very full stomachs. Obviously, bass are feeding heavily on the readily available threadfin shad. Try fishing with a floating Rat-L-Trap or shallow-diving crankbait with chartreuse in it (to match the threadfin's yellow/green tail).

Jerkworms and spinnerbaits will also produce schooling-size bass.

Local anglers are concluding that this has been one of the best years in the lake's history for catching schooling-size largemouth bass. Mr. Jim Veal Sr., owner of Pana Vista Lodge, reported seeing more schooling bass this year than in the past 50 years he has been associated with the lake. FWC biologist, Bret Kolterman, also

observed more bass this year than in the previous 20 years he has been sampling the lake. Bret reported seeing more 3-5 pound bass this year and expects that Panasoffkee should be producing more



*One of the many bass Jim Veal has seen from Lake Panasoffkee this year.*

trophy bass in the near future. Most bass collected during electrofishing samples were hanging off the shoreline in slightly deeper water.

Electrofishing samples also showed large numbers of smaller-sized bluegill around eel grass beds and near shore. Good numbers of 9 to 10-inch bluegill were also observed. Fishing with crickets or grass shrimp around eel grass beds should work well for the available bream.

The increase in open-water habitat from dredging, along with the abundance of threadfin shad have combined to produce a renewed black crappie fishery. Anglers reported good catches of large crappie this season, and biologists have seen more crappie in their sampling.

FWC freshwater fish biologists predicted recently that Lake Panasoffkee will be one of the best bream-fishing sites in the state during 2009. Two new fish camps have opened, helping the local economy and drawing in additional anglers from around the country.

Florida's recreational freshwater fisheries generate \$2.4 billion in local economic impact annually and support 23,500 jobs (2006 National Survey of

Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Related Recreation, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau). And don't forget to add in the enhanced real estate and quality-of-life values associated with living near a healthy lake, the countless hours of enjoyment experienced by those recreating on and around the water and the benefits to our native fish and wildlife gained by habitat restoration.

*Instant licenses are available at [MyFWC.com/License](http://MyFWC.com/License) or by calling 888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356). Report violators by calling \*FWC or #FWC on your cell phone, or 888-404-3922. Visit [MyFWC.com/Fishing/Updates](http://MyFWC.com/Fishing/Updates) for more Fish Busters' columns.*