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NWA Editorial: Cavefish help region develop the right way

Cavefish help region develop the right way

By NWA Democrat-Gazette
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How much is an Ozark cavefish worth?

In the early 1990's, the people behind construction of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport estimated their worth at around \$5 million each.

What's the point?

The Ozark cavefish is watching out for Northwest Arkansas water quality, and giving towns in the region the opportunity to do the same.

It was good for a laugh in the midst of some financial misery. The discovery of two Ozark blind cavefish in a well on the regional airport property was, in part, responsible for a federal requirement that the airport install an extensive rainwater management system to eliminate pollutants in the runoff from hard surfaces. Total cost: \$10 million.

It wasn't the first time these eye-less creatures were the subjects of humor or eye rolls, nor will it be the last. To some extent, the endangered species has become the poster fish for government regulations, which are no where near becoming endangered.

According to the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, the historic range of the Ozark cavefish included 24 Ozark Mountain caves in Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. The agency says that range has shrunk to 21 caves these days, including seven in Northwest Arkansas.

The 2 1/4-inch translucent fish live in underground streams where there is no light, which explains a bit about how they get along with no eyes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers the fish a threatened species. The Missouri Department of Conservation lists them as endangered.

What is the big deal about these critters?

Perhaps the most oft-used analogy is to the caged canaries miners would take with them into the mine tunnels where they worked. A serious danger -- methane or carbon monoxide gases -- was a constant concern in the mines. The little canaries were generally more sensitive than the humans to the deadline gases, so if the canary fell over dead, the miners new it was time to rush out.

Today, we might call the Ozark cavefish the equivalent of a radar detector, warning its driver of the situation just ahead.

These fish are extraordinarily sensitive to their ecological surroundings. It's not that anyone -- at least anyone we know -- is fixated on them because they fry up for some fine eatin'. No, the cavefish are living barometers of the condition of the Northwest Arkansas water supply and how well we're taking care of it.

In short, if the cave fish disappear, it means the region's water quality is on the decline. With all the development and population growth in Northwest Arkansas, the region's leaders must be continually concerned with protecting water supplies. Just ask anyone out west how important both quantity and quality of water is. Compared to them, Northwest Arkansas is the land of bounty.

A recently released study suggests the Ozark cavefish and residential develop can co-exist in the 12,500-acre Cave Springs recharge area that includes land in Cave Springs, Lowell, Springdale and Rogers. It's an area full of development opportunities, but it would be easy to disrupt the ecological underpinnings.

The good news, researchers say, is the presence of the cavefish demonstrates the groundwater in the area is fairly high quality. Water moves so easily underground in parts of Northwest Arkansas, however, that it's relatively easy to contaminate a water supply.

The fundamental question is how can development happen without threatening the sensitive ecosystem that preserves the region's water quality. The study contracted by the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission suggests the creation of buffer areas along sensitive streams, runoff detention ponds along Interstate 49 and Arkansas 264, and the establishment of "best management practices" for development.

To some people's ears, that means overreaching government regulation and restrictions on private property that make it hard to develop. The study is backing a push for a common development ordinance for the four cities involved. Naturally, that's one person's regulation is another person's infringement of property rights.

Cave Springs Mayor Travis Lee gave voice to those worried regulations might go too far. His city wants to develop its tax base as more people move into the area.

"I want everybody to think long-term and make sure we're making the right decisions for Cave Springs," Lee said. "The water quality and the cavefish and the landowners are all very important so we've got to come to a happy medium to make sure we're sustainable."

The scientific folks involved say they want to ensure facts and reliable science are used to back up any proposals. We couldn't agree more.

Regulations on development cannot be viewed as a tool to stymie development within the watershed, but those pushing development cannot themselves be as blind as the cavefish when it comes to valuing protecting of the environment.

This critical discussion must happen before irreparable harm is done. Nobody will be served by casting decisions as a choice of development or water quality preservation. The recent study suggests both can happen.

Approaching it any other way would suggest the Ozark cavefish isn't the only creature that's blind.

Commentary on 04/17/2015