

Aquatic Creatures and Kentucky Culture

Kentucky is one of the most diverse states when it comes to wildlife. While most wildlife conservationists focus on the four-legged beasts that occupy the forests and grasslands of the Bluegrass state, the creatures who call the water their home are equally as important. Amidst shimmering fish, slick salamanders, and sensational mussels, there are unique examples of wildlife in every nook and cranny of Kentucky. Each of these species is crucial to Kentucky citizens, the wildlife around us, and our culture.

Aquatic wildlife is often overlooked during discussions of conservation, but their habitats are arguably the most important. After all, all animals need water to survive. Just like land animals prefer certain habitats, different species of fish prefer certain habitats. Because so many different species of fish live in the water, they all have unique needs. Some fish prefer to live around “structures,” which are objects and features found within the water. Some examples of these structures are tree stumps, weeds, and rocks. However, some other fish prefer to live in open areas of water where they have open space to roam. In the same vein, some fish prefer deep and cold waters to shallow and warm waters. Because water is vital to all species, conservation of the species within it is just as important. Although fish may not be as intriguing as a bobcat or a boar, their habitats ensure that these other species can survive.

Water habitats are crucial to amphibians, as well. One example of a unique species that calls Kentucky its home is the Eastern hellbender, which is the largest salamander in North America. According to the article “Eastern Hellbender” from the Winter 2018 issue of *Kentucky Afield*, “Although the hellbender appears to be widespread in many streams or rivers in Kentucky, they are difficult to monitor. Because hellbenders are susceptible to low oxygen and

pollutants in the water, their survival depends on healthy waters throughout Kentucky.” Just like the hundreds of species of Kentucky fish, the hellbender prefers specific environments within the water. The Eastern hellbender is a creature shrouded in urban legend, possessing elusive names such as the snot otter, lasagna lizard, and mud-devil. Wildlife conservation isn’t just about keeping Kentucky’s animals alive; it’s also about keeping Kentucky culture alive.

Although Kentucky is known for coal mining and tobacco production, pearl mining used to be a profitable, and much more glamorous, source of income for Kentuckians. To quote National Park Service biologist Steve Bakaletz, “The country people would come down to [the Cumberland River] on Sunday after church and look for pearls. They would see if the Lord was looking out for them. It was like the lottery to them. It was the cash crop down here before tobacco.” Pearls in Kentucky are found in mussels, which are found in The Big South Fork of the Cumberland River. It used to be home to 55 species of mussels, but it’s now home to only 25 species. Although coal mines are infamous for the demise of canaries, mussels are also susceptible to acidic runoff that results from coal mining. However, the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife founded the Center for Mollusk Conservation to help raise the mussel population. Because of the improved water quality, many new mussel species have found new habitats in the Cumberland River. Mussels also serve as natural filters that keep lakes, rivers, and streams clean. The growth in the mussel population also increases the populations of other aquatic species.

In conclusion, the many aquatic species of Kentucky are crucial to the citizens of the Bluegrass state. The specific habitats of fish, the unique legends of the Eastern hellbender, and the long history of pearl mining are all crucial to the preservation of Kentucky culture. There are over 100 conservation districts maintaining the safety of the hundreds of fascinating species that inhabit Kentucky. To continue the protection of these precious keystones of Kentucky, these

Kaylee Tharp

organizations need volunteers and support. Each county has its own unique conservation district, which means there's always something new to learn about your own community and the fascinating beasts that call it home alongside you.

Works Cited

Keeping It Wild: Sustaining Kentucky's Wildlife 2023 Conservation Writing and Jim Claypool Writing Contest Tabloid

"Fresh Water Mussels in Tennessee." *Tennessee State Government - TN.Gov*, www.tn.gov/twra/wildlife/fish/fresh-water-mussels-in-tennessee.html. Accessed 3 Nov. 2023.