

## **Fishing in the Indy canals are only history now**

INDIANAPOLIS - Since the state of Indiana diverted water into the newly created Central Canal in 1839, it has been inhabited by several different species of fish. As a result, there are written and photographic records of children and adults fishing in the canal over the past 165 years, even where it runs through the heart of the state capital.

But despite its long history of fishing access for downtown residents, the area presently known as the Indianapolis Canal Walk is no longer open for fishing.

In recent times, the 1.47 mile stretch of the canal from Eleventh Street to the White River was lined with concrete, and fish were temporarily evicted from their long time home. Thanks to Mother Nature or perhaps an unapproved fish stocking or two, largemouth bass, bluegills and carp found their way back into the downtown canal and started to grow and multiply again. The canal is currently full of trophy sized bass and the kind of slab-sided bluegills that pan-fishermen dream about catching.

The section of the canal where fishing is closed flows past the Indiana Government Center in the center of the city, and is currently owned and operated by the City of Indianapolis' Department of Metropolitan Development. When they began transforming the canal into a tourist destination, they never intended for fish to find their way back into the canal.

"We did not put the fish in the new canal, and we have no idea who did," said Justin Ohlemiller, the department's Public Information Officer. He added that along with a prohibition on swimming in the canal, fishing is not allowed anywhere along the Canal Walk.

"Safety is our main concern, since there are always a lot of people using the canal in boats and along the walkways. We are concerned people casting hooks and fishing line in such close quarters could cause an accident."

Since the canal was renovated, no one has asked his department for permission to fish, Ohlemiller said.

"That is because unlike the Pacers, Colts and the IRL, fishermen aren't organized or have media relations departments that barrage the media and city government with press releases and agendas," said Joe King, Spokesperson for the Dirty Dozen, an organization dedicated to giving inner city children access to the outdoor sports. "Fishermen, especially kids can't compete, so we get very little press, and we always lose when our interests are contrary to the needs of big business."

As a child, King fished from the dirt banks of the Downtown canal, catching stringers full of big crappies and staying out of trouble. It was one of the few places city kids could go to enjoy the outdoors without a lot of money or transportation, he said.

Indianapolis resident Floyd Pruitt supports fishing in the canal as well. He was visiting the canal walk on Father's day with his family when a big bass swam by. His eight year old granddaughter asked why they couldn't fish there.

"That got me to thinking, why couldn't there be at least some limited fishing opportunities down here," Pruitt said. "They seem to allow about every other type of activity along the walk."

Bryan King of Griffith, Ind., a first time visitor to the canal, also said he thought fishing would be a great addition to the scenery up and down the walk if done safely.

"What if they allowed fishing in designated areas? That way, there would be more use and benefit from the resource, and safety concerns could be contained and managed," he said.

Bryan King, who is not related to Joe King, also cited the benefit to children who are typically left without a place to fish, especially in the city. He added that the only time fishing becomes offensive is when dead fish and garbage are left laying around.

### **Compromise?**

Though Ohlemiller said no one has ever asked, and that they have no immediate plans to include any fishing opportunities along the canal walk, he added, “we are always open to new ideas and new ways to utilize the canal for the benefit of everyone that wants to use it.”

With that in mind, Joe King offered a compromise. “Why doesn’t the city sponsor a couple fishing events on the canal just for children every year?” he asked. King said if anyone but the city conducted the outings, the canal would have to be opened up for every organization that wanted to have an outing there.

And to be fair, King said he recognized the progress the city has made in the downtown area, and agreed that it might be counterproductive to leave the entire canal open for fishing year round.

“Set aside a couple days a year, maybe make it all catch and release or have the DNR stock the canal, and people will be shocked how many kids show up,” he said. “In our experience at the Dirty Dozen, just because kids don’t ask to go fishing, doesn’t mean they won’t have the time of their lives if given the opportunity.”