

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

Zuni Bluehead Sucker



Photo: New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

SENSITIVE SOUTHWESTERN SUCKER

The Zuni bluehead sucker is a small, slender fish with a bluish head, silvery tan to dark green back, and yellowish to silvery white sides and abdomen. The fish grows between 3.5 to 8 inches. During the spawning season, males exhibit a bright red band running laterally along each side .

This fish is highly imperiled, numbering only a few hundred individuals in just a few stream segments in two small watersheds in New Mexico and Arizona. It has garnered a host of special designations—state listings, a federal sensitive species designation, and tribal protections—but not the protection it needs most: “threatened” or “endangered” status under the federal Endangered Species Act.

RESTRICTED RANGE

Also known as the “Zuni mountain sucker,” the Zuni bluehead sucker was once common in the Little Colorado and Zuni River drainages. The species’ current range has been reduced to less than 10 percent of its historic distribution. The fish is now occurs in three semi-isolated populations (totaling just 3 stream miles) in the upper Rio Nutria drainage in west-central New Mexico, and scattered areas along 27 miles of the Kinlichee (a.k.a. “Kin Li Chee”) watershed in Arizona.

The sucker faces myriad threats, including habitat modification and stream siltation caused by logging, livestock grazing, road construction, residential development and reservoirs; reduced or discontinuous stream flow from water withdrawal for irrigation; application of piscicides (fish toxicants); and competition with and predation by exotic fishes and crayfish.

KNOW YOUR SUCKER

- **Prehistoric Parentage.** Scientists postulate that the Zuni bluehead sucker may be a prehistoric hybrid of the Rio Grande sucker (*Catostomus plebeius*) and bluehead sucker (*Catostomus discobolus*).
- **Geography and Genetics.** The current geographic isolation of Zuni bluehead sucker populations appears to be affecting the species’ genetics. There is evidence of potential inbreeding in New Mexico, while other research suggests that some populations in Arizona have become genetically distinct from those in New Mexico.

