

[Will Sunshine bass recapture Lake Apopka's glory days?](#)

By Rich McKay |Sentinel Staff Writer

APOPKA – Beware gizzard shad, finned scourge of [Lake Apopka!](#)

The state has a hungry, hybrid superfish with pointy teeth. Its name is sunshine bass, and it's going to eat you.

It's all part of a state fish ranger's plan to bring back the lake's glory days, when it was known as the "Bass Capital of the World."

Before sport fishing returns to the state's most polluted lake, though, the water must be cleaned up. And that's been a challenge for decades.

Standing at the Magnolia Park boat dock lapped by tea-colored waves, Marty Hale described his plan.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, of which Hale is a fisheries administrator, stocked the lake with about 400,000 baby sunshine bass, the offspring of a male striped bass and a female white bass. The cost was about \$20,000, or a nickel a fish. And 200,000 more are coming in 2010.

They were hatched at the state's Blackwater Research Center in Pensacola, raised to fingerling size in a state aqua-lab in Sumter County and then trucked in a chilled tanker to Lake Apopka last April.

State biologists checked the lake the other day and found that the sunshine bass are growing fat and happy.

"They're predators and they primarily eat gizzard shad," Hale said.

The lake was once lined with 29 fish camps as well as resorts that in the 1930s drew the likes of movie legend [Clark Gable](#), tourists and anglers from across the world and well-heeled mobsters.

But decades of abuse and neglect, and a massive reduction of the lake's size for muck farming, turned it into a 31,000-acre pool of algae, fed by phosphorous and pesticide runoff from farms that later led to fish and bird kills.

While phosphates are a key ingredient to all life, too much in the water feeds the tiny floating plants — algae that suck the dissolved oxygen from the lake. Largemouth bass and other sport fish are gone.

What remains are scavenger fish that thrive in the rank ooze and algae-laden water. The gizzard shad are among the lake's villains. They eat algae and dirt on the lake bottom and excrete phosphorous back into the water.

The state has tried several plans to get rid of the shad, including giving licenses to commercial fisherman to catch them with gill nets. The captured shad are destined for doom as crab and crawfish bait.

Since 1993, about 1million pounds of gizzard shad have been harvested each year, but it hasn't been enough.

That's where the sunshine bass come in. Hale said they will spend their four- or five-year lifespans eating the shad. Though they won't grow as large as their cousins, the largemouth bass, sunshine bass are hearty enough to thrive in the lake, Hale said.

"They're doing quite well, getting to be about nine or 10 inches," he said. "By this time next year they should be 6-pounders about 16 inches long."

And when sunshine bass are harvested, the phosphates come with them, in the fish meat and bones. The phosphates are safe to eat, and are in most foods, including soda drinks.

But local anglers are skeptical.

The lake used to be great, "Ten-pounders were common. Every few years we hear of a new plan to bring it back, but I'd have to see it to believe it."

Hale said he thinks this plan will work and that in time the sunshine's cousin the largemouth bass can thrive there, too. But he wouldn't put a time frame on the recovery.

"How long will it take? Who knows, I don't have a crystal ball," he said.

Would Hale eat fish from Lake Apopka?

"Sure, but I have to have hush puppies and cheese grits with it," he said.