

PYGMY SUNFISH PROJECT OVERVIEW

RIVERBANKS ZOOLOGICAL PARK

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The pygmy sunfishes (*Elassomatidae*) is a family of small southeastern United States freshwater fishes consisting of six described species and possibly two more yet to be described. They have been identified by the Southeastern Fishes Council (SFC) as a family of special concern needing conservation assistance, particularly the Spring Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma alabamae*). Of the six described species, three are most rare and vulnerable which are the *Elassoma boehlkei*, *Elassoma okatie*, and *Elassoma alabamae*.

Elassomatidae has been added to the Regional Collection Plan of the Freshwater Fishes Taxon Advisory Group (FFTAG) of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) and incorporated into the TAG's five-year action plan. This means that this project has been specified as one of the few freshwater fishes projects of which AZA member institutions are to highly prioritize when allocating conservation resources. There are approximately two hundred AZA institutions across North American in the US and Canada.

The Pygmy Sunfish Project goals are to:

- (1) Establish self-sustaining populations at AZA institutions of the three rare species of pygmies, with the separate management of all evolutionary significant units (ESU's), with these specimens being provided by Riverbanks Zoological Park to those institutions so that we can;
- (2) Continue to work with university researchers at the University of South Carolina and University of Alabama to catalog the DNA of all captive held pygmy sunfishes, and;
- (3) Once captive populations are established, to work in conjunction with southeastern states' Departments of Natural Resources and other government agencies to facilitate release of captive bred animals back into areas of their traditional range where development, droughts, and other pressures have decimated the population.
- (4) Also, establishment of a MOU in partnership with the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife to establish pygmy sunfishes on federally protected land.

Our project advisors include Dr. Fritz Rohde from NC Division of Marine Fisheries who originally described two of the species of pygmies. His knowledge and expertise help guide the program as it pertains to wild populations. We are also interested in seeking out and establishing close working relationships with other interested academic or government parties.

The Riverbanks aquarium staff has already been successful in completing several steps toward reaching the goals of the project including:

- (1) Acknowledgement by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association FFTAG of the project and its high conservation value;
- (2) The placement of *Elassoma spp.* at several AZA institutions for conservation propagation and display;
- (3) The commitment of another thirteen AZA institutions to accept animals into their collections for conservation propagation and display;
- (4) Continuing progress being made in the areas of propagation, DNA sampling, collecting, ESU management, record keeping and government collaborations by Riverbanks Zoological Park;
- (5) A signed Memo of Understanding with the Department of Army, Fort Gordon, Georgia to protect and reintroduce pygmies into refurbished habitats on the base.

Please direct any project questions or comments to the project coordinator:

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