Dear Maryland State Legislature,

Invasive Blue Catfish pose an existential threat to the Chesapeake Bay. They are super abundant generalists that can eat anything and survive a wide range of conditions. Because of this, in the last 50 years, they have established to such large populations that they make up about 70% of the biomass in some Chesapeake River Tributaries, which means if you take a net and scoop all life (even the plants and plankton) out of these tributaries, they would make up 70% of the weight. My lab at Salisbury university is currently researching their diet in the Nanticoke River on the Eastern Shore and we are finding that their most common prey are blue crabs, white perch, and threatened river herring, but they are also eating everything from wood ducks to muskrats to striped bass. Estimates from just a portion of one western shore tributary suggest they eat about 2.5 million crabs per year, but that study acknowledged that number is likely an understatement. Spread that out over the entire Chesapeake Bay system and that's a lot of valuable crabs these fish are removing from the bay, not the mention the other commercially and recreationally important species they are consuming. Additionally, these fish compete with prey for native predators like Striped Bass and Drum, leaving less food for these commercially and recreationally important species that many visitors and residents of the Chesapeake Bay pay good money to the local economy to catch. Blue catfish put those species at risk, along with the livelihood of charter captains and fishing-related business that rely on the fish competing with Blue Catfish.

Because blue catfish are so well established in the Bay, there is nothing we do can do to completely remove them, but we can reduce their population to minimize the negative effects they are having on the Bay. The best way to do this is to further establish a commercial market and processing capabilities and modifying the regulatory process for wild-caught catfish from the Bay. This would ensure that watermen can consistently get fair prices for catfish, incentivizing more watermen to go out and catch more catfish. These fish are tasty, nutritious, and safe to eat, so increasing the commercial catfish industry in Maryland would provide a lot more low-cost, high-protein food, which would strengthen food security for the state and beyond. Increasing blue catfish catches could also provide nutritious, delicious, affordable meals to many state institutions like schools, universities, prisons, and food banks.

Overall, any efforts to curb the blue catfish population by promoting it as sustainable, healthy, low-cost food source through improving processing capabilities is a win-win-win for everyone: a win for the ecosystem threatened by this invasive species, a win for watermen and the MD seafood industry by increasing the value of the blue catfish fishery and mitigating risks to other valuable species that are threatened by the catfish, and a win for the many food insecure people in MD and across the country that could use more tasty, low-cost, healthy protein options. There is probably enough blue catfish in the Bay to feed everyone in the state of Maryland, but it is a matter of catching those fish, taking them out of the Bay, and getting them to the people. Therefore, I support HB 1083 to help achieve those tasks I would be happy to advise the state legislature on the science surrounding invasive species ecology and the courses of action regarding invasive species in the bay to help achieve these tasks.

Sincerely,

Dr. Noah Bressman, PhD

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