

MS Thesis
Department of Environmental Science and Policy
College of Science
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Title: Trophic changes in a freshwater tidal food web after water quality improvements and invasive species (*Ictalurus furcatus*) introduction.

Thesis Director: Kim de Mutsert

Committee: Joris van der Ham, R. Chris Jones

ABSTRACT

An ecosystem modeling approach was used to evaluate the impacts of water quality improvement and invasive species introduction on system structure and function in a freshwater tidal ecosystem, Gunston Cove, in the Potomac River in Virginia, USA. Two trophic models were constructed in Ecosim using long-term survey data and used to compare aquatic communities before and after the ecosystem underwent a stable state shift in which the primary production shifted from phytoplankton-dominated to submerged aquatic vegetation-dominated. Additionally, invasive Blue Catfish were introduced to Gunston Cove in 2001. Trophic changes accompanying water quality improvement and the subsequent stable state shift were evaluated, in addition to the trophic impacts of invasive species introduction. The comparative approach allowed evaluation of the effects of both events on trophic dynamics and ecosystem maturity and function. The comparison of Mixed Trophic Impacts showed that the invasive Blue Catfish have functionally displaced native catfishes in the Gunston Cove food web by reducing the native catfish trophic impacts on the greater food web. The comparison of system metrics showed evidence of a maturing system following water quality improvement. The food web model representing Gunston Cove in the current submerged aquatic vegetation stable state provides a foundation for future research and evaluation of management and policy decisions.