

Summary: Bob Boensch, Unionoida (Freshwater Mussels)

Bob Boensch of The Nature Conservancy was the TWIG leader for Mussels in partnership with Marsha May of Texas Parks and Wildlife. Freshwater mussels have been elevated to one of the most threatened groups of organisms in North America. Extensive surveys have been desired for the Big Thicket conservation area for quite some time. Boensch proposed coordinating and participating in multiple surveys of the creeks within Big Thicket to determine the presence, abundance, and diversity of freshwater mussels.

Mussel research was approved in the Minutes of May 2007 and April 2008. No funds were solicited.

Data was reported using the Texas Mussel Watch forms and emails rather than a spreadsheet. It was shared with ToD and Texas Mussel Watch. Much of it was collected along Village creek which runs through the Sandyland Nature Conservancy.

In December 2010, the Big Thicket Association was the recipient of \$82,500 in mitigation funds through Sierra Club litigation with Alloy Polymers. It was decided that funds would be used to pay for data management salary for the Thicket of Director for 3 years to clean up and summarize data and especially focus on mussel reporting. Research continued and was thus expanded.

A NPS survey led by Stephanie Burgess (BTNP Oil and Gas Program Manager) was conducted to check for sensitive species with mussel TWIG leader, Bob Boensch, some additional interns and seasonal employees. This project occurred on the Neches River in Orange County in conjunction with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and was also shared with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department as part of the statewide Texas Mussel Watch Program.

A formal report at the conclusion was written by Mary Johnston and Mona Halvorsen summarizing mussel research to date. Most significant was a drought which resulted in many dead specimens.

Boensch offered a Science Café and hosted Kountze ISD students for a program on board the Ivory Bill. A great picture was used on the front page of the Beaumont Enterprise. It may be reproduced with permission of the newspaper.

Continued mussel research was recommended due to their significance as an indicator species for environmental quality.

Submitted by Mary C. Johnston, Nov. 11, 2020