

Martinez Marina hosts sturgeon derby

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MARTINEZ -- More than 100 boats full of anglers -- men, women and children -- cast off before dawn in search of fishing spots of the elusive sturgeon and a chance to win more than \$3,000.

From the Carquinez Bridge east to the Suisun Bridge and Montezuma Slough, more than 430 kids and adults participated in the eighth annual Diamond Classic Catch and Release Sturgeon Derby for cash, prizes and environmental education.

There was no charge for kids to enter the derby with a parent, they did not have to bring their own equipment, could fish off the pier and go home with prizes for catching any kind of a fish, according to derby founder Steve Talmadge.

Forty kids fished from the pier.

"My goal is to get kids fishing, off the streets and away from TV where they can learn to fish in an environmentally responsible safe way and have some fun," Talmadge said. "They all got a T-shirt, prizes and could qualify for the drawing if they caught a legal sturgeon."

"It is all about the kids," said Martinez Marina Harbormaster Craig Paulsen after the January derby.

More than 120 young people learned to respect and conserve fish, and play by fishing rules. Talmadge had been dismayed in the past by a focus on cash prizes and what he calls "disrespect for the fish." Having fished for sturgeon since high school and owning Flash Sportfishing for 17 years, he figured there had to be a better way to share his passion for fishing.

"Nine years ago I wanted to start a derby that would be fair, and teach catch and release," Talmadge said.

He began talking with other sport fishermen about the wasted fish and unfair competition that sometimes occurred with traditional fishing derbies.

"Sturgeon is indigenous to this area and a challenging fish to catch. They can live to be more than 100 years old and weigh as much as 1,000 pounds," Talmadge explained. "I'm glad that Fish and Game made a rule of three per year. In the past, there was a moratorium (on them)."

He came up with a \$25 adult entry fee that includes a night-before seminar on radio etiquette, sturgeon fishing rules and techniques. Entrants who catch a legally sized sturgeon have a chance to win more than \$3,000 at an end-of-the-day raffle and celebration held at the Martinez Yacht Club.

"It wouldn't be possible without all of the volunteer captains, weigh masters, donors, the Harbor (Martinez Marina) and the (Martinez) bait shop. Every penny goes right back to the winners."

The 2014 entry fees totaling \$8,750 were divided between the first- through seventh-place finishers.

Volunteer weigh master Greg Rodriguez and his friend Paul VanDiver said, "We had a great time." They were staged in zone four, "The Cut" (between Roe and Ryers Islands).

Rodriguez raced to measure sturgeon as soon as he was notified of a catch by radio. There were 95 radio dispatches at this year's derby.

The minute the fish was measured for legal size, it was released and the fisherman was given a ticket to be entered in the cash prize drawing at the end of the day.

Captains of other sport fishing vessels volunteered their expertise and made donations, and other sponsors offered raffle prizes such as custom fishing rods, tackle boxes and fishing gear. Rodriguez and his wife Kerri contributed gift baskets.

"I think it is a very well run derby," fisherman William Odum commented. "I didn't do very well this year. Everything was too small, but we had a 54-incher a couple of years ago. We will be back next year."

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