

Sandfish

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In news– South Africa's sandfish are on the brink of extinction.

About sandfish-

- They are **migratory freshwater fish found only in South Africa** that can grow to over half a metre in length.
- They **sport a pronounced downturned mouth**, which is used to **graze algae off rocks** and to **grub in mud** and sand on the stream bed.
- As **one of the largest grazers in South Africa's Doring River system**, sandfish **keep the rivers clean and the food web balanced**.
- They also **act as an umbrella species** – protecting them indirectly protects river ecosystems and other species that inhabit them.
- That's by virtue of their migratory life cycle: **Sandfish move over long distances of river at different life stages**.
- To thrive, they **need healthy, connected rivers that hold water year-round** and don't harbour alien species.
- The sandfish has an **impressive spawning strategy**. It migrates dozens (perhaps even hundreds) of kilometres each year to reach its tributary spawning grounds.
- Sandfish were **once abundant and widespread across the Olifants and Doring River systems**, but have recently disappeared from the Olifants. **Their numbers in the Doring are in sharp decline**.
- **Catastrophic unseasonal flows** due to climate change during the 2013 spawning season likely catalysed this decline.
- The **long drought** that followed prevented population recovery. Adding to the problem was the **presence of non-native black bass and bluegill sunfish**.

- Some of the threats faced by sandfish are **predation** by introduced **non-native fishes**, the **construction of dams that block upstream** spawning migrations, extreme climatic events, and rivers that are drying due to climate change, thirsty alien plants, and the **excessive withdrawal of water to supply agriculture** and towns in arid regions.
- The biggest worry is the **lack of juvenile and subadult sandfish in the Doring River**. It indicates an ageing population with few, if any, young sandfish surviving the precarious early life stages.
- These conditions, ubiquitous throughout the sandfish's remaining range, have resulted in bringing the species to the brink of extinction.