

ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

October 2023

Fishing is an activity that people have enjoyed throughout history. This month in Collections, we are choosing to highlight these garfish scales.

The garfish is a member of the *Lepisosteidae* family. There are seven species of gar in total, and four of them can be found in Florida (*Fishes in the Fresh Waters of Florida Gallery*, 2020). Those four are the spotted gar, longnose gar, Florida gar, and alligator gar. The alligator gar is the biggest of these species and can grow up to 8 feet long (*Alligator Gar — Not A Threat to Humans*, n.d.). Garfish have what are called ganoid scales, meaning that they have a layer of ganoin on the outside of their scales, making them very tough and protective. Their scales also interlock which makes them almost like natural armor (*Lepisosteus osseus*, n.d.)(Sherman et al., 2016). With its elongated snout and pointy teeth, a garfish may be an unsettling sight to see. However, when it comes to the alligator gar, there are no confirmed attacks on people. The only time they are of any danger is when fishermen try to catch and handle them (*Alligator Gar — Not A Threat to Humans*, n.d.). So maybe just cut the line if you accidentally reel in an alligator gar.

In an archaeological context, garfish scales are mostly interpreted as food refuse. Garfish remains appear in the archaeological record of the



Southeastern United States from the Archaic through the late prehistoric periods (8000 BC – 1450 AD). There were notched garfish scales found at Westmoreland-Barbers site in Tennessee that were interpreted as adornments (Peres et al., 2016). Also, some hypothesize that garfish scales were used for arrowheads by some populations, although more study is needed on this point. If this was the case, it would most likely be the alligator gar scale used for this purpose (Costa & Fox, 2016).

As far as the THPO Collections team is concerned, we have hundreds if not thousands of garfish scales, and they are noticeable throughout the entire archaeological collection. Indeed, they are not rare in the archeological contexts that we work with. Most of the scales that the archaeology team collects from the field belong to the smaller garfish species. They come to a size of about 1 ½ cm, while the alligator gar scales can get around 2 ½ cm (Costa & Fox, 2016). While garfish scales may be one of the more common artifacts to come through the archaeology laboratory, it is still compelling to have such a unique animal be a part of the record.



To learn more about Florida's wildlife, check out the resources at www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu

