“First you gotta walk before you run, champ.” My grandfather said this to me as I held my skinned knee, bloodied from a tumble off my bike. This is a lesson that has always echoed through my brain over the years and is not only a lesson for the human condition, but for fish as well. Before a fish can “run” into adulthood, it first has to “walk” it’s way through the juvenile stage. What I am referring to is known as recruitment, or the process by which a juvenile fish survives through early life and becomes a reproducing member of the population. Recruitment is a fundamental process that drives all populations but also has baffled numerous scientists trying to understand what makes recruitment “tick.” Along these lines, the purpose of my graduate research at Southeast Missouri State University is to attempt to describe the processes driving recruitment of juvenile fish in the Middle Mississippi River. In particular we are focusing on centrarchids, a group of fish that includes crappie, bluegill, and bass. The Middle Mississippi River lies between the confluences of the Missouri River at St. Louis, MO down to the confluence with the Ohio River at Cairo, IL. This area has been highly modified by humans to facilitate shipping and other industrial processes, taking what was once a slow, meandering stretch of river and creating a deep and swift river that isn’t friendly to a number of species. Additionally, the creation of levees has severed the ties between the main river and the surrounding areas traditionally flooded with some regularity. These areas, known as the “floodplain,” are immensely important to fish reproduction as they create ideal breeding and nursery habitats for fish to utilize to their advantage. The life of a juvenile fish is tough and only a small fraction of any one spawn typically make it to adulthood so it becomes imperative that a population has consistent and fruitful spawning events to maintain healthy numbers. Centrarchids are one of the groups that rely heavily on flooding and backwater areas for reproduction, which translates to poor recruitment in the Middle Mississippi under current conditions. Through restoration we have the potential to bolster centrarchid recruitment but much like fish have to walk before they can run, we have walk through what is driving recruitment before we can run to restoration. The objective of this study is to determine what key factors have the most influence on centrachid recruitment in the Middle Mississippi on a year-to-year basis. The research is in embryonic stages but so far we are seeing that flooding appears to be the major driver of recruitment for both Black and White Crappie and we are beginning to delve into other species. The years in which the number of days the Middle Mississippi river gage reaches over 32 feet for at least roughly 40 days, we see strong year-classes for crappie species and poor year classes in the years the river doesn’t. As a validation, we are collecting crappie otoliths and are going to age these structures to see if the distribution of ages matches our results for strong year-classes. This research has potential for great impacts both locally and over broader scales as well. We are beginning to move into an age of restoration where we have started to recognize the importance of preserving ecosystem functions and the ecosystem services these translate into. Floodplain areas act as natural defenses against flooding, helping to slow and hold the onslaught of water. The Middle Mississippi is not alone in its issues with human modification, so these results have the ability to be applied both up and down the Mississippi River as well as to other modified river systems of all sizes throughout the world. Additionally, by restoring centrachid populations we are opening up recreational opportunities for anglers both young and old, helping to make one of the world’s largest rivers more accessible to all. To use an ancient Kenyan proverb I think applies today even more than previously: “You must treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It is loaned to you by your children.”