

Of Carp and Men

The problem of Exotic fishes

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I've fished for over two thirds of my forty something years on this earth. My Father took me fishing for trout and pan fish when I was well before the age of ten. In spite of, or because of, my nature many of my earliest memories involve me, water and fish. Not just the catch, but the whole experience. I remember watching sculpins in Bennet Spring State Park. I remember watching little minnows, colorful and vibrant as they dashed near the shore. I remember catching an Alligator Gar with my Uncle Dean at Wappapella Lake. I remember my first Colorado cutthroat trout when that same Uncle took me to Colorado. I remember catching tadpoles and other odd bugs in the water and sitting in wonder. I remember all those things and those memories have made their mark upon me...

I'm sure my Father and those who took me fishing had no idea what was stirring in that young boy's brain. Whatever it was in my head, it affected me. I touched me so deeply that when I grew up and found my way, somehow water and fish always made a place in my life. I've fished, sampled .studied, bred and played with fish as long as I can remember. Fish and fishing have made it to a near obsession in my life. I've fished in ponds, springs, rivers, lakes , swamps, oceans ,bays and mud holes in more states provinces and districts than I can remember. I'm pretty much a fish junkie. I've studied non game species, collected many of them. To me collecting and fishing are the same. I love my local fish, some I aquarium keep , some I catch and release , some make it to the table. I keep a fish room in my basement stocked with local species. That fish room is my classroom. I have learned more watching those fish than I've ever learned from any book. To me fish are more than a hobby they are my teachers, my adversary, my passion and my love.

Having fished from Florida to Wisconsin and most places in between I see clearly the struggles our fishes are having. Not only are our native fishes subject to the usual pressures of fishing, pollution and unneeded dam's, but we now have a legitimate exotics fish's problem in almost every state. A problem that is due in no small part to the apathy of us who are fishermen and those we have entrusted to be caretakers of our natural resources. These Fisheries personnel have told us for decades that our local fisheries are not good enough. If only the Mississippi River had a little more this or that then it would be all right. To advance their agenda the various State and Federal Agencies need our support. So they spin things one way or another with the bottom line being our fisheries needs fixing. The fishes that exist here are not good enough. The solution often includes some big omnivorous monster from somewhere else. Thus our waterways are regularly peppered with new exotic fishes. Instead of promoting better habitat management we keep getting offered "better" fishes. That management style won't work. The only way to improve fishing is to improve habitat. Exotics won't do that. Despite that fact, the "better fish's crowd" persist in their efforts. They continue in bringing us one invasive exotic after another.

Invasive exotics species are masters of survival. They eat most everything, they breed like rodents and pretty much alter their environments to suit them. Consider them the viruses of the fish world. Exotics are here to prosper at any cost. They destroy our local fish and turn our hot fishing spots into muck ponds, suitable only (you guessed it) for them. While not all introductions of exotics turn into invasive species, the risk is there with every plant or animal we bring to our shores. The attitude that we can somehow foresee the impact of an introduction is both naive and foolish. I've checked and most of the fish I've met don't read the books that tell them where they will and won't go or what they will and won't eat.

For a moment imagine that I applied the same rules the fisheries fix it guys have applied to our water ways, to our national parks. Just for a moment lets say the rules were the same on land and sea. Let's say I figured that Yellowstone could make a lot more money if it had a common large mammal to hunt. Being a pragmatist I realize that there are many species out there that could fill the role of easy to hunt large mammals, a carp of the plains so to speak. So I import feral hogs to Yellowstone. In just a few years their impact becomes seen. The hogs are running the park, wallowing in the geysers, they root up every plant, they eat everything and they breed like rodents. The elk and bison drift away and well old faithful becomes a spewing pig wallow. However hunting has improved and the license fees have gone up 900%. One day some old timers ask "How could you do this to Yellowstone our most spectacular natural treasure". My response (assuming I'm better fish's type of manager) "Well, they make easy hunting and hunting profits are up this year, so I like em. You see Sir Yellowstone had a problem and we fixed it "As ludicrous as it sounds that type of management occurs regularly with some of our fisheries folks. If only we had better fish then the fishing would be better they scream. So they release these exotic invasive "feral hogs" into one watershed after another.

I've seen the results of these "feral hogs" in our waterways and I no longer do "nothing" when I come across an exotic. I follow a simple motto "***once caught, never returned***". Every carp I find in public waters does not make it back in, every Oscar and Cichlid I've found in Florida never makes it back to its canal home. I've even found a few Plecostomas Catfish in Florida; they made it to the grill but not back to the canal. Some exotics become fertilizer, some become snapping turtle food, some even make it to my home aquarium, but none ever make it back to our waters. I know that I alone pulling out the odd exotic won't make a big difference as I am just one person. When I cull an exotic I can say with confidence I am not part of the problem but instead part of the solution. So I continue to do my small part ever hopeful that someday the tide will turn against these exotics. Ever hopeful that what I do matters in some meaningful way. I find comfort in knowing that I made an effort towards the greater good. I dented the darkness.

The Exotics least wanted list

Common Carp: Means Of Introduction: Sporadic attempts to establish were not widely publicized until 1860 when an early writer referred to carp that had already established themselves in the Hudson r. NY as "Scaly foreigners..." However, noted for their incredible ability to convert water to meat and their durability in transport, plus their ability to rapidly populate, their popularity grew in the 1870s. They were dubbed the "miracle fish" due to these attributes by a self promoting farmer, Julius Poppe after he imported just 5 fingerlings from Germany. The US Government stepped in soon after. They began culturing and distributing these "Miracle fish" in 1877 via the US Fish Commission... Within just 5 years, some 250,000 fish per year were being distributed throughout the states by special railroads from DC and Maryland. After a brief initial commercial boom the public soon soured on this boney, strong tasting fish. By that time they were well established and a permanent part of American Waters.

Status: native to all states and Canada and Mexico. They turn most waters turbid due to their filter feeding habit of sifting thru soil. They have proven very resistant to chemical removal techniques. They remain the personification of the word trash fish.

Blue Tilapia: Means of Introduction: This species has been introduced through a combination of means, including stocking and experimental work by states and private companies (e.g., the electric power industry), and release by individuals seeking to use the species as a sport fish, as forage for warm water predatory fish, as a food source, and as a means of aquatic plant control. Introductions and spread have resulted by way of escapes or releases from aquaculture facilities and experimental control areas, and from various other holding sites (e.g., zoological parks); through aquarium and bait bucket releases; and by intentional transport by anglers and private individuals.

Status: Established or possibly established in ten states. Established in parts of Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, North Carolina, and Texas. Possibly established in Colorado, Idaho, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. Reported from Alabama, Georgia, and Kansas. For more than a decade it has been considered the most widespread foreign fish in Florida. Used as a sport fish occasionally within their range. They dominate in suitable environments to the detriment of local species. They are very prolific feeders and breeders. In Texas possession/release of a live Tilapia is a crime.

Grass Carp: Means of Introduction: Both authorized and unauthorized stockings of grass carp have taken place for biological control of vegetation. This species was first imported to the United States in 1963 to aquaculture facilities in Auburn, Alabama, and Stuttgart, Arkansas. The Auburn stock came from Taiwan, and the Arkansas stock was imported from Malaysia. The first release of this species into open waters took place at Stuttgart, Arkansas, when fish escaped the Fish Farming Experimental Station. However, many of the early stockings in Arkansas were in lakes or reservoirs open to stream systems, and by the early 1970s there were many reports of grass carp captured in the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. During the past few decades, the species has spread rapidly as a result of widely scattered research projects, stockings by federal, state, and local government agencies, legal and illegal interstate transport and release by individuals and private groups, escapes from farm ponds and aquaculture facilities; and natural

dispersal from introduction sites. Some of the agencies that have stocked grass carp in the past include the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, the Iowa Conservation Commission, the New Mexico Department of Fish and Game, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Status: It is established in 45 states. Chomping away at all that's in its path. While effective at vegetation control it has proven to be a difficult to control species. It has turned many a well vegetated waterway into a barren muddy water bowl. The greater question is why was it brought here? Does nothing here stateside eat aquatic vegetation?

Bighead Carp: Means of Introduction: Bighead carp were first imported into the United States in 1972 by a private fish farmer in Arkansas who wanted to use them in combination with other phytophagous fishes to improve water quality and increase fish production in culture ponds. In 1974 the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and Auburn University, Alabama, obtained stock to assess their potential benefits and impacts. The species first began to appear in open waters, the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, in the early 1980s, likely as a result of escapes from aquaculture facilities. In April 1994, several thousand bighead carp, along with a few black carp, escaped into the Osage River, Missouri, when high water flooded hatchery ponds at an aquaculture facility near Lake of the Ozarks.

Status: Well established in the Midwest and expanding their range. They have an odd habit of becoming airborne in the wake of motor boats. Boaters beware with this beast in town.

Silver Carp: Means of Introduction: This species was imported and stocked for phytoplankton control in eutrophic water bodies and also apparently as a food fish. It was first brought into the United States in 1973 when a private fish farmer imported silver carp into Arkansas. By the mid 1970s the silver carp was being raised at six state, federal, and private facilities, and by the late 1970s it had been stocked in several municipal sewage lagoons. By 1980 the species was discovered in natural waters, probably a result of escapes from fish hatcheries and other types of aquaculture facilities. The occurrence of silver carp in the Ouachita River of the Red River system in Louisiana was likely the result of an escape from an aquaculture facility upstream in Arkansas. The Florida introduction was probably a result of stock contamination, a silver carp having been inadvertently released with a stock of grass carp being used for aquatic plant control.

Status: Expanding their range. With an unlimited food supply in their new home in Mississippi River system their impact could be huge. As adults they compete with the main native Plankton feeder the Gizzard Shad. The Silver Carp simply out hustle the smaller native Plankton feeders. The Silver Carp's feeding habits make it a threat to mussels, fish and invertebrates. As Plankton Feeders they sift tremendous amounts of larvae from the water, impacting the entire food web.

Round Goby: Means of Introduction: Introduced into the Great Lakes via freighter ballast. Spread to Lake Superior by freighters operating within the Great Lakes.

Status: This goby is established and apparently undergoing a population explosion in the Great Lakes. The goby was considered extremely abundant in the St. Clair River in 1994. Short trawls made in Lake Erie in October 1994 turned up 200 individuals. Frequent trawling in 1995 collected over 3,000 individuals near Fairport Harbor, Ohio. Densities in Calumet Harbor exceed 20 per square meter. Gravid females and different size classes have been found in Lake Erie only two individuals have been reported from Lake Superior. Walleye anglers in Detroit report that at times all they can catch are gobies. Which eagerly attack bait. This fish poses a serious threat to many native species and should be terminated on site.

Web Resources: (side Bar)

www.nativefish.org The Native Fish Conservancy they run a great little exotics removal program. Their native Fish Picture gallery is huge
<http://www.carpbusters.com.au/> Carp Busters An Australian Group that has turned exotics removal into a full time Job
<http://nas.er.usgs.gov/fishes/fisheslist> US Geological Surveys exotic Fishes site. They are the single best web resource. I found them invaluable while writing this piece.
www.swfwc.org/ANS/ Southwest Florida's Aquatic Nuisance Fishes website they give specific locals of exotics if you have a little fishing in mind.

Finally, the question comes down to what we are willing to tolerate. Is it easier and more tolerable to stay the status quo, or do we make the changes necessary to improve fishing via improved habitat. Shall we continue to take the short road and keep adding "better" fishes in hopes of sustaining a shrinking fishery? It's your money that pays for this. Every time you buy a license, you pay the bill on fisheries activities. Therefore you should have the final say what we are buying. Do you want to buy more exotics or would you prefer those financial resources be spent on habitat restoration or lower license fee's or on pizza for everyone? The bottom line is it our money and our country as in "We the People". I for one think the cost of exotics is too high. What they destroy far outweighs what they add. I say no more exotics. Spend that money on buying land, buying pizza, buying scholarships, heck buy computers anything but exotics. You cast your vote, call your local fisheries personal and let them know what you think.

Until next good luck and good fishing.