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## GETTING ASIAN CARP ON THE PLATE

Chuck Quirnbach

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An invasive species known as Asian Carp is migrating toward the Great Lakes. Some scientists fear the Asian carp will harm sport fishing in the lakes, if the carp ever get past some man-made barriers. Anglers, state conservation officials, and others are trying to get the invasive fish on Congress's plate and even on yours. The Great Lakes Radio Consortium's Chuck Quirnbach has the story:

Asian carp escaped from southern U.S. fish farms a few years ago and the voracious eaters of key parts of the food chain have been munching their way North on the Mississippi River and several of its tributaries.

(sound of boat moving through water)

On the spoon river near Peoria, Illinois, the invasive carp are quite common. With a little encouragement from a nearby electro-shocker, the large fish sometimes jumps out of the water and right into a boat.

(sound of boat)

This two-foot long slippery visitor flips back and forth on the bottom of the aluminum boat until Thad Cook of the Illinois Natural History Survey grabs the fish. Cook notes the markings of the fish and says it's one of the Asian carp known as a silver carp.

"It's a healthy fish, cool to the touch, too."

(sound of boat)

Not too far away, on the Illinois River, you can find more evidence of the Asian carp's prevalence.

Two other staffers of the Natural History Survey have caught about 40 Asian carp known as bighead carp in a net that was only out for about twenty minutes. Erik harms holds open the carp's dark red gills.

"Those are the gills and they use that to filter out the phytoplankton, plankton."

Researchers estimate there are now millions of Asian carp in the Illinois River. They've continued to crowd out more of the native fish such as the white bass and buffalo fish. Not only are the invasive fish causing problems for other fish... they're causing problems for people. One woman was injured this year when an Asian carp jumped and hit her in the head.

This big fish story might get worse. This year, the Asian carp migrated another 30 miles closer to the Great Lakes. That puts the carp within 100 miles of Lake Michigan.

Phil Moy is with the Wisconsin Sea Grant. He says, look out if the carp gets in the Great Lakes.

"Well, it's just gonna be another mouth to feed. We've seen some of the insult the zebra

mussels have added to the ecosystem and we just don't need to take the risk of another one."

Other researchers agree it's best to keep the Asian carp out of the Great Lakes. But some say it's not a sure thing that the fish would wreak havoc in those waters.

Mark Pegg directs the Illinois River biological station for the Illinois Natural History Survey. He says the prolific carp might not reproduce as quickly in colder lake waters.

"Fish and a lot of other organisms show a resilience to environmental conditions, so I'm not gonna say that's gonna stop 'em dead in their tracks, but it's certainly an avenue of hope."

Pegg says it's also possible that commercial anglers along the Illinois River may slow the spread of the Asian carp by catching them and selling them.

"Anybody else, would you like to try it?"

Rick Smith is offering small pieces of cooked Asian carp, both regular and smoked. Smith runs the Big River Fish Corporation in Pearl, Illinois. He says he recently hired some anglers to haul in some of the invasive fish.

"For two months two crews fishin' there and we caught almost 200-hundred thousand pounds of fish in a month and a half and moved em."

Yep, people bought them to eat. But Smith admits that he won't pay much for Asian carp, until he's got a stronger customer demand for them. And he acknowledges that the big fish can be costly to harvest, because they tend to tear angler's nets. So government officials say commercial anglers alone won't stop the spread of Asian carp. There might have to be more reinforcements upstream.

A barge passes through the Chicago sanitary and ship canal. The canal connects the Illinois River system with Lake Michigan. At one place on the bottom of the canal, there's a system of cables which electrifies the water. The two-million dollar barrier was originally built to keep the round goby that's invaded the Great Lakes out of the Mississippi. Now it's seen as a way to stop Asian Carp from getting into the Great Lakes. The electric barrier shocks the fish and is supposed to stop them from going any farther. But a few months ago, a common carp passed through the barrier as a barge was passing over it.

Chuck Shea is with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He says the Corps is testing to see if the steel barges disrupt the electric shock so that fish can get by the barrier alongside the barges.

"So we are going to do a study where we are actually renting barges and running them back and forth thru the barrier, while measuring the strength of the electrical field with a variety of equipment."

Shea says the results of the study could affect the design of a second electric barrier researchers want to put in a few hundred feet away.

But just getting money to improve the first barrier and build a second one is stalled in Washington. An invasive species bill could provide millions more dollars for Asian carp control. But Congress has yet to pass the measure.

Dennis Schnornack chairs the U.S. section of the International Joint Commission. The IJC is an advisory body that oversees the Great Lakes. Schnornack says at one point it looked like the invasive species bill would pass back in January.

"Well were nearly at the end of 2003 and haven't seen a committee meeting in either the House or the Senate, so that's very disappointing and cause for some alarm."

And it's not just the Great Lakes that could be affected. One of the fish was recently caught along the Mississippi River between Wisconsin and Minnesota, much farther North than the carp were previously thought to be. So some people are now pushing for a 25 million dollar electric barrier across the Mississippi, so the carp don't find their way into places like the Wisconsin and Minnesota Rivers.

For the Great Lakes Radio Consortium, I'm Chuck Quirnbach.

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