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Keeping big carp out of big lakes

Asian species threaten Great Lakes system

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BY ERIC SHARP

FREE PRESS OUTDOORS WRITER

HAVANA, Ill. -- Mary Poppett earned a footnote in history last month when a 30-pound flying fish hit her on the head as she rode a jet ski along the Illinois River. The fish broke her nose and a vertebra, knocking her out and nearly drowning her before other boaters came to her aid.

Poppett, 35, is the first person known to suffer serious injuries from a collision with a flying Asian carp. But with millions of these foreign invaders filling the Mississippi and Illinois rivers in the past 10 years and now threatening to enter the Great Lakes, officials doubt she'll be the last.

"We're talking about millions of silver and bighead carp in the lower half of the Illinois River alone," said Dr. Mike Pegg, who runs the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Natural History Survey office. "They're moving up toward the Great Lakes. It's probably a little harder for them to get by the high-head dams upriver than the lower dams downstream, but all that probably will do is slow them down a little.

"If we don't find a way to stop them, I don't see anything to keep them from moving into the lakes."

Dennis Schornack, the American chairman of the International Joint Commission that oversees Great Lakes issues, said carp flying into boats and hitting passengers has become common in the Illinois River.

"Some of the commercial fishermen and other boaters who spend a lot of time on the river are wearing kill switches," he said.

The switches shut off the engine if a carp knocks the boater out of the driver's seat.

The Asian carp -- both the silver and bighead species -- have been seen in the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal about 25 miles below Lake Michigan. To keep the carp out of the Great Lakes, Schornack said, the United States and Canada must take quick action to upgrade a temporary electrical barrier and build a second one just downstream.

Illinois has put up \$1.7 million of the \$9 million needed for the barrier projects

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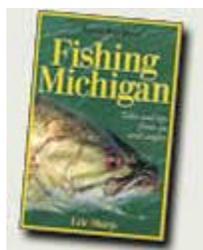
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Illinois has put up \$1.7 million of the \$3 million needed for the barrier project, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said it is authorized to put up the rest of the money. But the money to pay back Illinois and pay for other projects aimed at keeping exotic species out of the Great Lakes is tied up in Congress awaiting passage of the National Aquatic Invasive Species Act, introduced by Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan.

Scientists fear that if the carp establish themselves in the Great Lakes and tributary rivers, they could decimate popular game fish and destroy entire ecosystems. The impact would be felt by anglers in Michigan and other states bordering the big lakes.

Asian carp were brought to the United States in the 1970s to eat algae in commercial fish ponds in Arkansas and Mississippi. Many of these aquaculture facilities were built along tributaries of the Mississippi River, and when floods inundated the region 30 years ago, the ponds overflowed their banks and the carp escaped into the wild.

Pegg said it is probably unrealistic to expect to keep all Asian carp from reaching the Great Lakes.

"There are just too many ways for them to get there," he said. "Small ones can arrive accidentally in bait buckets carried by fishermen, or maybe somebody brings in water with Asian carp eggs. And we know that some people deliberately release fish into new waters for all kinds of reasons. But I think that if we keep them from arriving in large numbers, we reduce the probability that they would be able to breed in the Great Lakes."

Silver carp commonly reach 35 pounds in this country, bigheads 50.

Though they are called carp, the new Asian species are not closely related to common carp, another Asian species. Common carp were brought into this country by the U.S. Fish Commission from Germany and England about 130 years ago to replace native game fish hurt by pollution, dams and overfishing.

Native fish have managed to co-exist with common carp in most areas, but the new Asian carp remove many nutrients in the water. They feed by filtering plankton, eating about 40 percent of their body weight each day.

Bighead and silver carp held in tanks for tests also demonstrated the ability to root food off the bottom if plankton levels dropped in the upper water column. And unlike common carp, bighead and silver carp can't be caught with a fishing rod.

Illinois DNR fisheries biologist Matt O'Hara and vegetation specialist Thad Cook ran an electro-shocking boat up a tributary of the Illinois River to look for silver and bighead carp. Probes hanging in the water off the bow of their boat sent an electric current into the water, and Asian carp began exploding through the surface as far as 75 yards away.

"We saw the first Asian carp in this area in 1991," O'Hara said. "A commercial fisherman brought it in. We had no idea what it was. Now when we do net samples to try to get a handle on how many there are in an area, it's common to get 100, 200 in a net in 10 minutes.

"You can catch the bigheads in a net, but the silvers have a sharp keel on the bottom of their bodies that cuts right through the monofilament meshes."

At a recent demonstration the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put on to publicize the threat from Asian carp, one firm showed up to hand out samples of smoked Asian carp and Asian carp pate as proof that the fish could be

of smoked Asian carp and Asian carp pate as proof that the fish could be marketed in this country. Other people have suggested trying to market the carp in Asia, where they are commonly sold.

"It tasted pretty good, but that's not a smart thing to do," Pegg said. "We don't want to establish a commercial fishery that gets people dependent on Asian carp. Then we'll start hearing complaints if their numbers start to go down, but ideally, we'd find a way to eliminate them entirely."

In some of the Illinois River's lake-like pools, Asian carp make up 90 percent of the biomass. They're so prevalent that commercial fishermen often can't lift their nets because the carp weigh too much.

Feeding in midwater, the bighead and silver carp are exploiting a biological niche that puts them in competition with gizzard shad, the primary bait fish for bass, walleyes, muskellunge and other game species the state stocks in the river.

"The carp like warm water to spawn" -- about 75 degrees -- "and they apparently spawn two or three times a year," Pegg said. "They grow so fast, up to 13 inches in a year, that it doesn't take long before they're too big for most of the predators."

"The literature also says they need running water for successful spawning, but that apparently isn't true, at least not in the United States. We've found young-of-the-year in a lake that was isolated from the river for over a year."

"The million-dollar question is whether they can survive if they get into the Great Lakes, and if they can survive, can they reproduce? People used to think they were a warm-water species. Now we know that they actually prefer colder water, and in Asia you find them all the way up into Siberia."

A short drive from Havana, biologist Ron Taylor sat above a fish-breeding raceway at the Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery and watched the reaction of baby silver carp to an electrical weir. Strips of metal were laid across the bottom, fed by 230 volts of electricity from a generator.

"When we tested adult bigheads, we were able to get a 100-percent repel rate," Taylor said. "They were turned back from the barrier so far away that our instruments couldn't measure any electrical current in the water."

"Then we tried it on juvenile carp, and they just swam right over the barrier like it wasn't even there. We were able to stop or kill them by increasing the electrical field, but it makes you wonder. Would some of them ignore a single barrier and dash right on through if something like a big predator or a barge scared them?"

No one is sure that electricity will work 100 percent, so scientists also are testing secondary barriers that use bubbles and underwater loudspeakers to repel the fish, and they are investigating a virus that might kill Asian carp without causing severe damage to other species.

"Asian carp are a very serious and immediate problem," Schornack said. "It's different in a place like China, where they have trouble feeding a huge population, and they'll accept one species taking over if it provides food."

"But would you want to go to the cupboard and find nothing but peanut butter? That could be the situation in the Great Lakes if we don't find a method and the funds to stop them."

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