

Asian Carp in Illinois Rivers

Picture yourself driving a boat or waterskiing, when suddenly a forty-pound fish jumps out of the water and smacks into your body. This is a real danger in the Mississippi River and its tributaries, including the Illinois River. For now boaters remain safe on the Chicago River and the Great Lakes thanks to electric barriers, but the danger of Asian Carp invading these waters is a serious concern.

Asian Carp were first brought to the U.S. in the 1970's to eat excess algae on catfish farms in the South. During floods, carp were washed into the Mississippi River, and they have successfully multiplied and expanded their range throughout the Mississippi and its tributaries. They eat massive amounts of plankton, depleting a food source vital to native fish species. How much do they eat? The carp can grow to 80 pounds, and they eat about 40% of their body weight each day. They reproduce rapidly and can quickly alter the food web and entire ecosystem of a river or lake.

One high-flying carp species in particular, the silver carp, is scaring boaters as well as fishermen and ecologists. The silver carp is also called the flying carp due to its tendency to leap 8-10 feet out of the water when frightened...and a boat engine, water skier, or a kid being pulled on an inner tube is enough to startle them! People have suffered broken jaws, noses, arms and vertebrae, as well as black eyes, concussions, cuts and bruises, from impacts with flying carp.

Enormous effort and expense has been expended to try to prevent Asian carp from entering the Great Lakes. If these invasive species gain entry, the entire ecosystem is in jeopardy, impacting native fish and other wildlife, commercial fisheries, and recreational uses of the lakes. Electric barriers have been installed on the canal connecting Lake Michigan with the Illinois River, about 30 miles southwest of Chicago. The barriers send electric impulses at split-second intervals to startle and turn back the fish. So far it appears to have worked well, but observers worry that wakes from large barges could push fish through the barrier, and that carp larvae might be accidentally carried in ballast tanks and discharged into the Great Lakes.

Commercial fishermen are doing their best to control carp populations in the Mississippi river by catching and shipping the fish back to markets in Asia and also to Asian-American communities in the U.S. They hope that carp will soon become accepted on the dinner menu by more Americans, particularly since harvesting native fish is no longer possible in waters taken over by Asian carp.

Asian carp were introduced into America's rivers by accident, but since we haven't found any way of eliminating them, you might want to try one for dinner soon...and be sure to watch out for flying carp on southern lakes and rivers!

Source(s):

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Author(s):

Written by Susan G. Scott (Lecturer) and Courtney Reese (Undergraduate Student) in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2010.