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A fish tail: The dog-eating snakehead

Stories about the air-breathing snakehead fish crawling on land and devouring the family dog are just urban legend, according to a local expert on the predatory species.

But Walt Courtenay said people should still be concerned about the snakehead and other exotic species invading native habitat.

"It's not a good idea to introduce non-native species. Period," said Courtenay, a research fishery biologist at the Center for Aquatic Resource Studies in Gainesville.

The snakehead was discovered in New York in July, the latest U.S. find of the ravenous predator. Because some snakehead can wriggle on land from one body of water to another, stories spread that snakehead hunt on land for pets and small children.

Courtenay said the fish is fearsome - but it doesn't walk on land and won't eat everything in front of its face. Still, he puts the snakehead into the same category as other exotic species that threaten to disrupt native food chains.

Florida has about 400 introduced fish and wildlife species, said Scott Hardin, exotic species coordinator for the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The commission is trying to educate residents about the folly of releasing exotic species into the wild.

"It's illegal, it's inhumane and it's ecologically unwise," he said.

Biologists at the Gainesville center, part of the U.S. Geological Survey, study underwater invaders such as secretive swamp eels and insatiable carp. As the center's resident snakehead expert, Courtenay reviews photos of the fish to determine if people have found the real thing.

The look of the snakehead is enough to provoke fears. The fish have long, cylindrical bodies and big mouths with sharp teeth. Scales and snake-like eyes earned the species its name.

While a tropical snakehead species is established in Florida waters, it's the northern snakehead species that is causing problems in New York. Five northern snakehead have been found since July in a lake in Queens, said Michael Fraser, spokesman for the New York Department of Environmental Conservation.

Waters from a tidal creek have since been released into the lake to increase salinity, he said, which snakehead can't tolerate. He said the state was lucky that the fish were in contained waters.

The situation mirrors the first northern snakehead discovery in 2002. The snakehead was found in a Maryland pond, which was poisoned to kill any other fish.

But Courtenay said more recent snakehead finds in the Potomac River and a lake that feeds into the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania are a bigger concern.

"When they're not in a confined space, there's nothing you can do," he said.

The spread of the Asian carp shows how an exotic species can establish itself in U.S. rivers, he said. Courtenay is now studying the distribution of the species, which was originally put in sewage treatment ponds to control plankton.

Those fish ended up getting out and spreading through the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, he said. Carp feed on plankton that are part of native species' diets, so there's fears the species will out-muscle native fish.

While the carp accidentally made their way into U.S. waters, Courtenay said the snakehead might have been released by anglers seeking a new challenge.

That's the way brown hoplo - a South American catfish - made its way into waters in Central and South Florida, Hardin said. South American natives living in Florida introduced the fish to be able to catch one of their favorite meals.

He said released pets are another way exotic species get introduced in the state. Such issues make it hard to determine how many exotic species have been introduced and how far they've spread.

"We really don't know how many are out there," he said.

Add exotic species that hitchhike into this country on ships and Courtenay said there's plenty of aquatic invaders to keep him busy. But he doesn't believe it's a losing battle to keep out exotic species.

"I certainly hope not," he said.

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