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LIONFISH OBSERVED OFF NORTH CAROLINA

Divers and fishers alert: Non-native Lionfish are beautiful but have venomous spines

Research efforts have begun by the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to determine the number and range of a venomous Pacific Ocean fish that was recently discovered in the waters off the southern Atlantic coast.

Research divers from NOAA's Laboratory in Beaufort, N.C., have observed an Indo-Pacific species of lionfish near two shipwrecks off the coast of North Carolina. Local divers were the first to spot the species and have observed lionfish at additional sites. Officials are concerned because the lionfish is not a native species to the southeastern United States, and its venomous spines are dangerous to humans and other fish.

One lionfish was collected by a recreational scuba diver, and scientists at the Beaufort Laboratory sent the specimen to a lionfish expert for positive identification. The species is *Pterois volitans*, a popular salt water aquarium fish. The number of observations and distance between sightings suggest that more lionfish may be found off the coast and that lionfish may have been able to survive the winter water temperatures.

"Now that scientists have positively identified the species, we need to determine the distribution of lionfish along the southeastern United States," said Bill Hogarth, director of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries).

"We are also concerned that scuba divers and fishers may encounter this species in North Carolina or elsewhere along the southeast coast, and we want to get the word out about their venomous spines," said Margaret Davidson, director of NOAA's National Ocean Service (NOAA Ocean Service). The dorsal, anal and pelvic spines of the lionfish are venomous.

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NOAA Fisheries and NOAA Ocean Service are developing and implementing a plan for the research that is needed in order to define the distribution of lionfish along the southeastern coast of the United States and to determine if they are reproducing.

Beaufort Laboratory scientists will conduct the research utilizing several types of studies to determine the extent, range, and population of fish species. Research will focus on age and growth of the species along with their food habits. Field studies are conducted to document changes in species composition and abundance. Divers will also be utilized as necessary to assess current fish communities as part of their regular surveys. Once this information is gathered, officials will be able to ascertain what steps, if any, may be necessary to halt the spread of this species.

Scuba divers can help with the NOAA research effort by reporting lionfish sightings to Dr. Donald Hoss, Director, NOAA Beaufort Laboratory; 101 Pivers Island Rd. Beaufort, NC 28516-9722; phone: (252) 728-8746; fax: (252) 728-8784; email: don.hoss@noaa.gov. Please be prepared to provide coordinates of where the lionfish was found and at what depth. If possible, a photograph should accompany the above information.

A fact sheet containing a photo of a lionfish is available on the Internet at:
http://shrimp.bea.nmfs.gov/research/lionfish_factsheet.pdf.