
King of the Pests

Lionfish in the Atlantic Ocean



Lionfish can grow to be 18 inches long

pest

[pĕst] noun

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1. An annoying person or thing
 2. An insect or small animal that destroys food, crops, livestock, trees, etc.

The lionfish is native to the warm waters of the South Pacific and Indian Oceans. But recently, it has begun invading the Atlantic Ocean.

No one is sure how the first lionfish got into the Atlantic Ocean. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew swept through Florida and at least six lionfish escaped from a broken aquarium near the beach. Lionfish owners may have released pet lionfish they no longer wanted. Since then, the lionfish have been spotted from as far north as the state of Massachusetts to as far south as Venezuela. They have been spotted all over the western Caribbean, in the Gulf of Mexico, and in Central America.

The lionfish is venomous, with sharp spikes on the top and bottom of its body. When it stings, the lionfish injects venom into your flesh. This sting can cause searing pain that can last for days. It can even cause breathing problems or paralysis.

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This map shows all the reported lionfish sightings from 1985–2017.



Lionfish are a problem because they have no natural predators in the Atlantic Ocean. Nothing is keeping the lionfish population in check and they are taking over.

Lionfish are pests because they eat and destroy the natural habitat of native animals. They are eating machines that happily devour baby fish, lobster, crabs, and other reef animals. Reefs across the world are already in grave danger from pollution and climate change. And now they are in even more danger because of lionfish.

Hundreds of types of fish live in a single reef. Baby fish, in particular, live and hide in reefs—and they are the lionfish's favorite meal. These baby reef fish may be tiny now, but some grow to be giant fish like grouper. When a single lionfish moves into a reef, it reduces the reef's population by 80 percent.

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What's worse is that lionfish eat baby fish that are very important to the survival of coral reefs, such as parrotfish. Parrotfish eat algae, which are microscopic plants. If too much algae grows, it uses up all the oxygen in the water, which kills the reef. Without the parrotfish, the reefs are doubly doomed.



Adona9 at the English language Wikipedia

Adult parrotfish

Lionfish are also considered pests because they eat fish that we eat. They eat many of the baby fish in fisheries and they also impact commercial fishing. Commercial fishing refers to big fishing boats that catch fish like tuna, salmon, lobster, crabs, and all sorts of other fish that you find in the supermarket.

How can we stop the spread of the lionfish? By eating them! Apparently they are delicious. Scientists think that if more people want to eat lionfish, more fishermen will fish for them. So the fisherman will make money and save the coral reefs at the same time. The other way is to hold lionfish hunting competitions. This means that divers compete to see who can spear the most lionfish.