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An Asian Carp Invasion

By Justin Vogt



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Last August, Philippe Parola was fishing in a bayou near Pierre Part, in southwestern Louisiana. Parola, a French chef who came to the United States in early 1980s, had been asked by producers from the Food Network program *Extreme Cuisine with Jeff Corwin* to catch an alligator gar, a toothy fish popular with sport fishermen in the region.

Just after heading out onto the water, Parola and his guide were suddenly joined by an unexpected guest. "Literally minutes from the landing, this 25-pound fish jumped out of the water and landed right on a seat in the boat," Parola recalled. "I was like, what the hell? And then we looked behind us and there were another 50 or 100 fish jumping everywhere."

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Parola was witnessing an event that is increasingly common in the waters of the Mississippi River Valley: the frenzied leaping of Asian silver carp. Silver carp, along with three related Asian carp species, are not native to the U.S. and are designated as an "aquatic invasive species." They are prolific eaters, capable of consuming huge quantities of plant and animal plankton. And they grow very big, very

quickly: one of the species, the bighead carp, can reach five feet in length and weigh more than 100 pounds.

Silver carp, like the one that jumped into Parola's boat, can grow to about three feet in length, and can weigh as much as 60 pounds. For reasons no one quite understands, they are intensely agitated by boat engines and respond by jumping out of the water, sometimes as high as eight feet. This poses a fairly serious (though sometimes humorous) risk for fishermen and boaters.

"I've been hit hard," said Duane Chapman, a fish biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and one of the foremost American experts on Asian carp. Chapman, who is based in Missouri, installed nets around his boat to protect himself. But that didn't work quite well enough. One time, he recalled, "a really large one came out from behind me. I heard it come out of the water, and I turned a little bit. The son of a gun cleared the net and hit me right above the teeth. I tell you, my neck hurt for two weeks. It was like getting hit by a bowling ball." Chapman decided to install a Plexiglas shield. [Curator's note: To see similar—but perhaps slightly funny—damage, watch the first minute of this video.]

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Asian carp present an even graver threat to the economy and the environment. Their massive appetite is the reason they were originally imported in the 1970s, by fish farmers in the southern U.S. who used the carp to clean out waste material and unwanted growth from retention ponds. But the carp soon escaped and slowly began establishing populations in the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The catastrophic Mississippi flooding of 1993 spurred that process by providing more spawning opportunities.

By the end of the 1990s, Asian carp had become a serious problem. The carp's insatiability has disrupted the food chain, eliminating food sources for crucial native fish like the bighead buffalo. And the carp grow so quickly that they are less vulnerable to predators than many native competitors. In the past 10 years, the carp have steadily made their way north, complicating life for commercial and recreational fishermen—especially in the Illinois River, which has proven to be a particularly good habitat.

Now, the main concern is that the carp are poised to enter the Great Lakes through a series of manmade canals in the Chicago area that unnaturally connect the Mississippi River Basin to Lake Michigan. An Asian carp population in the Great Lakes could prove far more damaging than the presence in the Mississippi Valley. The carp would be a major threat to walleyes, a lynchpin of the \$7 billion-a-year Great Lakes fishing industry.

Last month, the Obama administration announced a \$78.5 million **initiative** intended to prevent Asian carp from establishing a population in the Great Lakes. The plan involves reducing the amount of time the Chicago-area canal locks stay open; enhancing physical and electric barriers intended to keep the fish out; increasing efforts to catch and kill the fish; and more research into the feasibility of permanently closing the canals—an option strenuously opposed by the state of Illinois and a number of

influential industrial and shipping interests.

The federal anti-carp initiative also includes \$3 million in funding for "commercial market enhancements"—efforts to get people to buy and eat Asian carp, with the hope that a market for the fish will help limit its population. The chief obstacle is that people generally assume that Asian carp is similar to the common carp, a foul-smelling bottom feeder that very few Americans enjoy eating. In fact, the two types of fish share very few characteristics. But will it be possible to "re-brand" Asian carp?

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