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## Asian carp getting an appetizing image

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HOUMA — The notorious invasive fish known for leaping from the water and smacking unsuspecting fishermen may soon make it to a dinner table near you.

State Wildlife and Fisheries officials, Baton Rouge chef Philippe Parola and Rouses Supermarkets are working together to promote Asian carp, an invasive fish that has caused massive problems for boaters in northern states, as an appealing meal in south Louisiana.



Asian carp, now appearing in some Louisiana waterways, could soon be appearing on a table near you. Marketers are trying to promote the invasive species as a food fish.

"These Asian carp have been in Louisiana waters for close to 20 years and are sustaining their populations," said Gary Tilyou, Wildlife and Fisheries inland fisheries administrator. "This is a problem we have to manage to minimize impacts to our natural resources and the people that enjoy our Louisiana waterways."

The campaign includes a marketing plan that will rebrand the fish as "silverfin." Rouses Supermarkets will begin selling the fish in their stores across Louisiana, said Tim Acosta, Rouses Marketing and Advertising director.

"The Department of Wildlife and Fisheries came to us because they think this is a problem and they thought we could help," Acosta said. "We want to help the environment and the area we're in. We want to do what's best for Louisiana."

Asian carp have been tied to a number of problems for both fishermen and native Louisiana species.

The fish were introduced to the U.S. from east Asia in the 1970s to help manage aquaculture ponds and wastewater lagoons. They quickly escaped into the wild and arrived in Louisiana waters from the north in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Asian carp are commonly found in Louisiana in the Mississippi, Red and Ouachita rivers and the Atchafalaya Basin. Their movements into Terrebonne and Lafourche are limited by their low tolerance of salt water, but locally, Asian carp have a confirmed population in Lake Field and are rumored to be found in Lake Verret.

The massive fish commonly exceed 20 pounds. Record catches have approached 100 pounds.

The silver carp, a species of Asian carp, is most recognized for its jumping ability. When startled by boat propellers, the fish leaps several feet out of the water, frequently hitting boats or people.

The fish have been known to cause boating accidents, black eyes, bruises or in the most extreme cases, death to the boater.

Another reason scientists are concerned about the fish is because silver carp are voracious eaters that can out-compete local fish for food.

The carp feed mainly on plankton, which is also the main diet for local shad, big-mouth buffalo and paddlefish. Plankton is also the main food source for larval catfish, bass and other freshwater fish.

One way officials hope to combat the fish invasion is by coming up with tasty recipes for the carp fillets.

Parola, along with other Louisiana chefs, will prepare a sampler of Asian carp recipes at a Wildlife and Fisheries event Tuesday in Baton Rouge.

Parola, who is originally from Paris but now considers himself a proud Louisianian, said what kept him in the state was great hunting and fishing.

"I want to make sure that someday my kids can enjoy the same things I enjoy," Parola said. "There is a river up north where literally all the native fish are gone. They took over."

Louisiana is known for its food, Parola said. So rather than poisoning the fish to get rid of them like northern states have done, wildlife officials are opting to make them an appetizing meal.

That involves rebranding the fish. Tilyou said too many people reject the idea of eating carp because they think of the native species that aren't good to eat.

"Carp is such a bad name. When you tell people it's carp they're not interested," Tilyou said. "These are a totally different fish. Give it a try."

Wildlife and Fisheries is also changing the angling laws to allow fishermen to catch Asian carp using dip nets, spears and snagging nets.

Because Asian carp are filter-feeding fish that eat plankton, they don't bite on a traditional hook and line. More creative fishing methods must be employed.

"You can bowfish for them, which is currently very popular for redbfish," Tilyou said. "In Illinois they organize dip net tournaments, where guys go out there and try to catch as many as they can."

The only issue is that when facing down Asian carp with a net you have to wear a helmet. The fish can cause serious head injuries when they fling themselves skyward.

Additionally, Tilyou said, while no one is likely to write you up for it, it's currently technically illegal to "catch" Asian carp that jump into your boat.

"We've never had to deal with people using their boat as a fishing pole before," he said.

Wildlife and Fisheries is planning to pass new rules that would allow boaters to keep fish that land in their vessels.

Asian carp currently have no size or possession limits.

"We will never be able to fully eradicate these fish, so we are trying to make the best out of what these fish have to offer. By creating a demand for the meat, we hope to create a commercial and recreational freshwater fishing industry for Asian carp," Tilyou said. "It tastes good. We encourage people to give it a try."

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