

Nebraska Waters at Risk from Asian Carp

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Asian carp were introduced into the U.S. from Asia in the 1970s to control phytoplankton in lakes, but they eventually made their way into natural waters – with disastrous results. If not carefully managed, the carp can spread at a lightning pace and, according to fisheries biologists, are now in Nebraska waters. Fish sampling conducted last year from the Loup Power Canal below the Columbus power plant show Asian carp to be one of the most abundant species.

Native species often are negatively impacted once Asian carp are introduced into their waterways, with channel catfish, walleye, bass and crappie the most affected. Once waterways are invaded with Asian carp, they will compete with native fish for food, as they can consume up to 20 percent of their body weight daily. They have little value as a food source in the U.S. and, because they feed on plankton, are almost impossible to catch.

The majority of the Asian carp threatening Nebraska are silver and bighead carp. Jumping silver carp have been known to cause serious injury to boaters, anglers and skiers who have been hit by the flying fish, as the adult fish can weigh anywhere from 20 to 40 pounds. Bighead carp usually don't jump, but can grow to 100 pounds or more.

Nebraska and South Dakota are both concerned about what will happen if Asian carp continue to spread. Biologists fear if they get established above Gavin's Point Dam on the border of South Dakota, they could then continue up the system towards Fort Randall Dam in South Dakota and up the Niobrara River towards Spencer Dam. Once Asian carp infiltrate water systems, they are almost impossible to control, according to Jeff Schuckman, Commission fisheries biologist for northeastern Nebraska. "Removal efforts don't work well, such as netting or shocking. The only control measures that are successful are keeping them from infiltrating other areas."

Young Asian carp look similar to gizzard shad that anglers use for bait, so moving them out of one area into another can create an infestation with catastrophic results. Strict regulations are intended to prevent people from moving the fish around; it's illegal to release fish in public waters that did not originate in the same body of water. In addition, baitfish regulations below Gavin's Point Dam for both Nebraska and South Dakota prohibit anyone from transporting collected baitfish outside of this Missouri River area. Gavin's Point Dam is one area biologists are keeping their eye on, as Gavin's Point is a barrier for all those fish. So far it seems to be working. "We also have education pamphlets for the public to show them the difference between young Asian carp and gizzard shad. At this point it's a big education and regulation effort," said Schuckman.

The high water on the Missouri River in 2010 created ideal spawning conditions downstream for bighead and silver carp, and their population exploded.

"They are there to stay," said Schuckman. "We are not going to be able to eradicate them, so we're just going to have to live with the presence of Asian carp, and educate and regulate where we can to keep people from spreading these things around."

It's something to keep in mind when using live bait for fishing – without the help of responsible anglers, the situation could quickly become much worse.

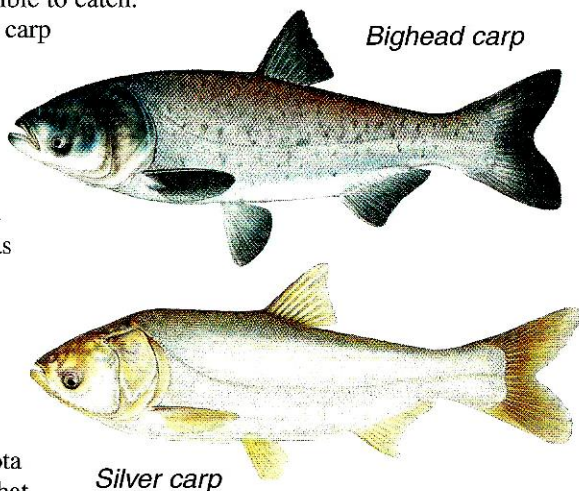


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