

King of the Pests

Lionfish in the Atlantic Ocean

By Albert Kok via Wikimedia Commons



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 from the South Pacific and Indian Oceans. Recently, it has begun invading the Atlantic Ocean.

No one is sure how the first lionfish got into the Atlantic. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew swept through Florida. At least six lionfish escaped from a broken aquarium near the beach. Lionfish owners may have released some fish into the Atlantic as well. Since then, lionfish have been spotted from Massachusetts to Venezuela.

The lionfish is venomous. It has sharp spikes on the top and bottom of its body. It uses these to sting predators. When it stings, the lionfish injects venom into your flesh. This sting can cause searing pain that lasts 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. They aren't originally from the Atlantic Ocean. They have no natural predators in the Atlantic. Nothing is keeping the lionfish population in check. So over time, there are more and more lionfish.

Lionfish are a pest. They are eating machines. They devour baby fish, lobster, crabs, and other reef animals. Reefs across the world are already in grave danger. Pollution and climate change threaten them. And the lionfish threaten reefs as well.

Hundreds of types of fish live in a single reef. Baby fish live and hide in reefs. These baby fish may be tiny now, but some grow to be giant fish like grouper. A single lionfish can reduce a reef's population by 80 percent.

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Lionfish eat fish that help protect coral reefs. They like to eat baby parrotfish. Parrotfish eat algae. Algae are microscopic plants. If too much algae grows, it uses up all the oxygen in the water. This kills the reef. Without the parrotfish, the reefs are doubly doomed.



Adona? at the English language Wikipedia

Adult parrotfish

Lionfish also eat fish that people eat. They eat the baby fish in fisheries. They also impact commercial fishing. This is how fish get to your supermarket. The lionfish eat the baby fish. That means there are less fish for people to eat.

How can we stop the spread of the lionfish? By eating them! Apparently they are delicious. If more people want to eat lionfish, more fishermen will fish for them. Another way is to hold lionfish hunting competitions. This means that divers compete to see who can spear the most lionfish.