

Why are lionfish a growing problem in the Atlantic Ocean?

Invasive lionfish threaten native fish and the environment in U.S. Atlantic coastal waters.



Invasive species are capable of causing extinctions of native plants and animals, reducing biodiversity, competing with native organisms for limited resources, and altering habitats.

Lionfish are native to the Indo-Pacific, but are now established along the southeast coast of the U.S., the Caribbean, and in parts of the Gulf of Mexico.

How did the fish get to the Atlantic? While the exact cause is unknown, it's likely that humans provided a helping hand. Experts speculate that people have been dumping unwanted lionfish from home aquariums into the Atlantic Ocean for up to 25 years.

Since lionfish are not native to Atlantic waters, they have very few predators. They are carnivores that feed on small crustaceans and fish, including the young of important commercial fish species such as snapper and grouper.

Unfortunately, NOAA researchers have concluded that invasive lionfish populations will continue to grow and cannot be eliminated using conventional methods. Marine invaders are nearly impossible to eradicate once established.

How lionfish will affect native fish populations and commercial fishing industries has yet to be determined. What is known is that non-native species can dramatically affect native ecosystems and local fishing economies. Experts are carefully studying these invaders to better understand their role in, and potential threat to, Atlantic Ocean ecosystems.

Lionfish have venomous spines that can be very painful. Scientists are also actively studying these fish to better understand the potential threat that lionfish pose to key reef and commercial fish species. [Learning more](#) about the habits and preferences of lionfish in non-native waters also helps experts determine where to look for these invasive fish.