

Asian Carp

“Asian carp” refers to several species of related fish originating from Asia. Two species of Asian carp—the bighead and silver carp—were imported into the southern United States to keep aquaculture facilities clean and to provide fresh fish for fish markets. Bighead and silver carp escaped into the wild in the 1970s and have been swimming northward ever since, overwhelming the Mississippi and Illinois River systems. In some areas, the Asian carp now comprise more than 95% of the biomass.

A Trail of Destruction

Bighead and silver carp are voracious eaters. This is a problem because the diet of Asian carp overlaps with the diet of native fish in the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. Asian carp consume plankton—algae and other microscopic organisms—stripping the aquatic food web of the key source of food for native fish. Averaging 30-40 pounds, some Asian carp can grow to be over 100 pounds. An Asian carp is capable of eating 5-20 percent of its body weight each day.

Between 1991 and 2000 the Asian carp population dramatically increased as fish spread throughout the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. Between 1994 and 1997 commercial catch of bighead carp in the Mississippi River increased from 5.5 tons to 55 tons. Today, commercial fishers in the Illinois River regularly catch up to 25,000 pounds of bighead and silver carp per day. The commercial value of Asian carp is quite low and much less valuable than the native fish they replaced.

In addition to causing ecological harm, the silver variety of the Asian carp has caused direct harm to people. The silver carp is skittish and easily startled by the sound of a boat motor. The sound causes the fish to leap as high as ten feet out of the water. They land in boats, damage property, and routinely injure people.

A Threat to the Great Lakes

As Asian carp continue to spread north, the Great Lakes are now at risk. An artificial connection—known as the Chicago Waterway System—connects the Great Lakes to the Illinois River, which connects to the Mississippi River. This waterway system provides a potential pathway for Asian carp to enter the Great Lakes.



Biologists, policy makers, and citizens have grown deeply concerned about the prospects of Asian carp entering the Great Lakes through the Chicago Waterway System. If these fish enter the Great Lakes, they will likely spread throughout the basin due to the natural and man-made connections and the widespread distribution of suitable habitat. While the fish will not find all parts of the Great Lakes to be hospitable, the lakes contain ample areas where the fish will thrive, reproduce, and cause harm.

Potential Impact on the Great Lakes Economy

The health of the Great Lakes is important to the U.S. economy. The Great Lakes provide over 1.5 million jobs to U.S citizens and over \$62 billion in wages. The establishment of Asian carp could decimate commercial and sportfish populations, hurting the Great Lakes' commercial, tribal, and sport fisheries, valued at more than \$7 billion annually.

Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee

Recognizing the environmental and economic importance of the Great Lakes, the Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee is a federal and state partnership that was formed to help prevent the establishment of Asian carp in the Great Lakes. Through intensive monitoring and rapid response actions, the ACRCC is leading the way in the control and management of Asian carp.



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