

Got Fish and Aquatic Plants? Get Habitattitude™.

Patrice Charlebois and Kristin TePas

It's an early summer morning in Marion, and a water gardener is tending her pond. Deciding that there is an overabundance of water hyacinth, she nets the excess plants and then wonders where to take them.

In Frankfort, it's moving day and a couple are downsizing from a large house to a condominium. There's no room for their fish tank in their new home. What to do?

These well-intentioned hobbyists may decide it's best to release their aquatic pets and plants into a nearby pond, lake or stream. This decision, however, could harm the environment as well as the released pets and plants.

Good Deed Gone Bad

Some aquarium hobbyists and water gardeners release their aquatic animals and plants into the natural environment out of kindness to these organisms. Release of pets and plants, however, is not always humane. Organisms discharged into the environment often die from starvation, are eaten by predators, or succumb to parasites and diseases. Although hobbyists seldom intend this fate for their former pets and plants, such fate frequently occurs.

Many aquarium and water garden organisms do thrive when released, however, and can cause significant environmental and economic harm (see "Hydrilla" sidebar). Those species most likely to cause harm are called "invasive." When introduced into a new environment, invasive species prosper at the expense of the native ones. Invasives compete with natives for food and space. They may prey upon them, infest them with parasites and diseases, and even change their genetic pools through hybridization. The ultimate result is that numbers of native species decline and the pond, lake or stream changes, usually in an undesirable and irreversible way.

In many cases, invasive animals and plants are non-native or "exotic." Species native to North America, however, may also become invasive when transported to another region of the continent. Regardless of origin, invasive aquatic organisms can be unintentionally spread by aquarium hobbyists and water gardeners.

Hydrilla: handle with care

Hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*), also known as water thyme, is a well-known aquarium and water garden plant native to parts of Asia and Africa. It was first found growing wild in North America (in Florida) in 1960, and has since appeared as far north as Maine and as far west as California. Hydrilla is a successful invader because it tolerates a wide range of environmental conditions and reproduces in various ways. As hydrilla grows, it branches more and more frequently, forming dense mats. These mats create inhospitable habitat for other plants and animals, clog water intake pipes, and hinder activities such as boating and swimming. Methods to control hydrilla are costly. Florida alone spends millions annually in hydrilla management.

What is Habitattitude™?

Habitattitude™ is a national public education campaign to raise awareness of the potentially harmful effects associated with releasing aquatic organisms into the natural environment, and to encourage responsible hobbyist behavior, particularly the use of release alternatives (see "Alternatives" sidebar). This campaign is a cooperative effort of Sea Grant, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Look for the Habitattitude™ fishbowl logo and accompanying prevention message—"protect our environment, do not release fish and aquatic plants"—to start popping up at your local pet stores.

Alternatives to Release

Do you have unwanted pets or plants?

Use these options:

- Contact retailers for proper handling advice or possible returns.
- Give to or trade with another aquarist, pond owner or water gardener.
- Donate to a local aquarium society, school or aquatic business.
- Seal aquatic plants in plastic bags and dispose in trash.
- Contact veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance on humane disposal of animals.
- Know your state regulations regarding these alternatives.

What Can You Do?

First and foremost, you can tend aquaria and water gardens responsibly by choosing alternatives to release. You can also learn more about the invasive species issue and share your knowledge with

fellow hobbyists. Finally, you can encourage your aquarium or water gardening clubs, pet retailers, nurseries and local governing agencies to help promote the “don’t release” message. By taking these steps, you play a vital role in helping protect our natural resources from aquatic invasive species.

Be a responsible hobbyist. Get Habitattitude™!

To learn more about Habitattitude™, visit Habitattitude.net. For more information on invasive species contact Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant at 847-872-8677 or visit www.sgnis.org.



Habitattitude™

PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT
DO NOT RELEASE FISH AND AQUATIC PLANTS

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www.Habitattitude.net

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