

Would you please pass the Asian carp?

Bighead and silver carp, two populous invasive species in Midwestern rivers, might soon find themselves in fewer rivers and on more dinner tables.

"Worldwide, silver carp is the most consumed freshwater fish—it is considered the hamburger of Asia," said U.S. Geological Survey fish biologist Duane Chapman, who is researching food market possibilities as a way to reduce Asian carp populations.

Asian carp are taking a toll on food chains in the Mississippi River and its tributaries, including the Illinois River; and separated from Lake Michigan by an experimental electric barrier, the carp now pose a threat to the Great Lakes.

"Asian carp could have a dramatic impact on Great Lakes fish populations," said Pat Charlebois, IISG aquatic invasives specialist. "Because they can grow very large, they are able to consume lots of food—both phytoplankton and zooplankton, which form the base of the food chain. If they get into the Great Lakes, they could take food away from our already-beleaguered native fish."

Lisa McKee, CEO of Big River Fish, has been selling Asian carp for human consumption for the past five years. "In a competitive market, you have to come up with new ideas to survive," said McKee, whose company is now the largest purchaser of bighead carp in the U.S. "With more and more popping up in our rivers, we had to start selling Asian carp to keep our fishermen in business," McKee said.

Although marketing is expensive and slow, McKee said Asian carp are now starting to pay off. In the last year, she sold over two million pounds of Asian carp. "Next year will be even better," she said.

Last year IISG took part in an event at Bass Pro Shop in Bolingbrook, Illinois to demonstrate to fishermen

how best to filet these fish. Shoppers were also able to sample cooked carp. "While I advocate the creation of markets for bighead and silver carp to reduce their populations, I am concerned that we might turn them into 'desirable fish,'" said Charlebois. "If that happens, they might be deliberately spread to other areas to create new fisheries."

"I'm also concerned that if their populations become depleted through these new markets, then those who have come to rely on Asian carp for their livelihood will lobby for enhancement of the fishery," she said.

Steve Shults, manager with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Aquatic Nuisance Species Program is equally cautious about integrating Asian carp into the food market. "Any kind of market is going to have to move an abundance of product to have any effect on the population," Shults said.

He noted that a company will have success until the raw materials are depleted. "Once the product has run out," he said, "the company would have to shut down and wait until the fish repopulate to open again. Balancing that cycle is a difficult thing to do."

McKee said she did not think the depletion of Asian carp as a resource is a realistic concern. "If they do run out," she added "our catfish and buffalo fish markets will be able to pick up again." Her main concern has been convincing reluctant consumers to purchase the fish. "Unfortunately, it's got that carp name on it," she said.

On the IISG web site at www.iiseagrant.org/asiancarp you can learn how to identify, catch, clean, and cook Asian carp.



Vera Gelder, working with Bass Pro Shops, serves up hot and delicious silver carp. The fish are cut leaving several 'y-bones' in each slice. The bones are easy to remove, and the meat is white and flaky. (Photo courtesy of Duane Chapman)