

## EAT LIONFISH CAMPAIGN

National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science

Lionfish (native to the Western Pacific) have invaded the waters of the Caribbean and are quickly multiplying along the East Coast from Florida through the Carolinas, devouring native reef fish as they go. According to some scientists, **the lionfish invasion has the potential to be the “most disastrous marine invasion in history,”** decimating commercially-valuable fish populations and wreaking havoc on our vulnerable coral reef ecosystems.

According to a recently released NOAA report, one of the only viable methods for controlling these predators is to encourage a market for them. Professional tasters have ranked the fish high for taste and texture, and a recent pilot project which brought the fish to several top New York and Chicago restaurants proved very successful. The eating of lionfish has become a grass-roots cause in some local areas, and several restaurants in the US and the Caribbean are serving up the fish whenever they can.

NOAA’s National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, who have conducted extensive lionfish research, have conceived an “Eat Lionfish” campaign that builds upon the original New York/Chicago pilot project. Top chefs in five cities will be hosting tasting events in 2010. NOAA will be working with them to develop press for the event that brings attention to the threat of lionfish and which highlights eating lionfish as a method of conservation and protection for our coral reefs. The media campaign will include not only pitches to major print outlets but also to television producers for The Food Network and The Travel Channel.

The intent is not to develop a fishery for the lionfish but to consume it out of existence in Caribbean and American waters. Given what we know about the worsening lionfish crisis, we feel that we would be negligent if we did not provide leadership on this issue. While fishermen, seafood wholesalers and restaurants are already demonstrating interest in bringing lionfish to market, we hope to serve as an additional catalyst in this effort. We anticipate that the main lionfish supply will be coming from the Bahamas and from parts of the US where the lionfish population is more established, such as North Carolina.

There are no existing regulatory impediments to selling lionfish commercially in the US. Currently there are no federal regulations concerning the landing and sales of lionfish; however, state regulations concerning diving and commercial licensing do apply. Similarly, there are no specific regulations concerning the importation of lionfish for human consumption into the US except those associated with all species, such as safe handling requirements, etc. As the result of our efforts, FDA has agreed to add *Pterois volitans*--the red lionfish--to the list of species approved for commercial sale under the name "lionfish".

In concert with the restaurant tasting events, NOAA will develop online resources for the interested public (including those in the diving and commercial fishing communities) that provide information on such issues as: the impact of lionfish on coral reefs, safe lionfish capture and handling, regulatory requirements for landing and sales, where to fish for lionfish, the latest information on lionfish populations and densities, nutritional analysis, and upcoming tasting events.

NOAA is building a diverse coalition to build and promote the campaign. We are working with commercial fishers, fish wholesalers, diving organizations, NGOs, and other federal agencies in this regard. We welcome the input of the SAFMC in how we can promote this effort in the south Atlantic region.