

“Fighting an Invasive Species By Adding It to the Menu” Transcript

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IRA FLATOW: Now, it's time to play Good Thing, Bad Thing. Because every story has a flip side.

[KITCHEN SOUNDS]

That sound you're listening to, it's a fish getting fried up by Chef Victor at Norman's Cay, a Caribbean-style restaurant in downtown Manhattan. But this isn't red snapper or sea bass. It's a lionfish, you know, the kind you see in your aquarium sometimes. It's black and orange, with those spiky venomous fins that cover it like a mane. Not your typical menu fare, I'm sure. I would say you're more apt to see it in an aquarium in somebody's apartment.

So how did this deadly fish end up on a dinner plate? For that, we turn to my next guest, Maia McGuire, Florida Sea Grant Extension Agent with the University of Florida. Maya, welcome to Science Friday.

MAIA MCGUIRE: It's great to be here, Ira.

FLATOW: So how can you find lionfish on the menu at select restaurants now? But there are many, many more of them, right, along the Southern Coast, Southeastern coast of the US. They're taking over in some places.

MCGUIRE: Sadly, that's true. They're found throughout the greater Caribbean area, in the Gulf of Mexico, and all the way up the East Coast of the United States.

FLATOW: So are they **competing** with other fish? Is that what makes them a danger for being there?

MCGUIRE: Yes, the big problem is they are **carnivorous** fish. And so they eat smaller fish and some crustaceans, things like a little shrimp. And the problem is, they're eating the same food that our **native** fish would like to be eating. And they're also eating the juveniles of our native predatory fish.

FLATOW: So who finally said, you know, let's get people to eat them? How did that start?

MCGUIRE: Yeah, I'm not sure who the individual was that first came up with that idea. I suspect it was several people probably simultaneously. As these fish started to become pretty **abundant** and everybody started wondering what can we do about them, the first question often is, can we eat them?

And so folks tried them. And they found that they're actually a very tasty fish. It's a mild white fish. And they take seasoning well. Chefs like working with them. So it kind of seemed like the perfect solution.

FLATOW: So how do you go about collecting them? Because they're not a schooling fish, right? You just can't put a net out and grab a whole bunch of them.

MCGUIRE: Right, they are a challenge to catch. They like to be on reef areas or areas with structure. And they actually like being under ledges a lot of the time. So it's not a great place to drag a net. They don't really take a hook very well. So the primary method by which they're caught is using divers, either armed with spear guns or with nets. So it's a pretty labor intensive fishery.

FLATOW: So that's the bad thing about this. The good thing is that you can catch them and fry them up.

And they taste good. The bad thing is that they're hard to go out and catch.

MCGUIRE: That's true.

FLATOW: So it sounds like this isn't the ultimate solution to curbing this **invasive species**.

MCGUIRE: Not until we can come up with a better way to catch the lionfish. There are folks in many different places right now trying to design a trap that might be specific for lionfish in hopes that we can use that in deep water, shallow water, all over the place. But of course, we don't want to be catching all of our native fish in those traps while we're trying to get a lionfish. So that's the challenge.

FLATOW: It's sort of a good thing, bad thing in itself is that it's good that we're frying them up and eating them. But what if everybody likes them and wants more of them?

MCGUIRE: Well, at this point, the rate at which they've expanded throughout our area, we're not too concerned about running out of lionfish. They have a very high reproductive rate. A single female lionfish can release up to two million eggs in a year. So I think we'd have to work really, really, really hard before we had to worry about running out of lionfish.

FLATOW: That's something we should all be worried about, yeah. All right, thank you, Dr. McGuire. Maia Maguire is Florida Sea Grant Extension Agent with the University of Florida. Have a good weekend.

MCGUIRE: Thanks. You, too.

FLATOW: We're going to take a break. And when we come back, it's how do we recover from the stress of this election. And we'll have a psychologist tell us her thoughts on how we can overcome it. So stay with us. We'll be right back after this break.