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Our mission is to manage the State's marine fishery resources through research, enforcement, and education for the maximum benefit of the resources and the citizens of Alabama.



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GULF & SOUTH ATLANTIC REGIONAL PANEL ON AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES

Alabama Marine Invasive Report

April 2017

Several invasive species have been documented in Alabama coastal waters. The Bocourt swimming crab (*Callinectes bocourti*), tessellated blenny (*Hypsoblennius invemar*), Australian spotted jellyfish (*Phyllorhiza punctata*), Asian green mussel (*Perna viridis*), Asian tiger shrimp (*Penaeus monodon*), and red lionfish (*Pterois volitans/miles*) have been documented although non-validated or undocumented reports of additional invasive species likely exist. Unfortunately, the ecological effects of these invasive species are poorly understood in Alabama's estuaries and Gulf of Mexico waters. However, interactions between indigenous species and invasive species typically results in negative impacts to the native species. Prey of Australian spotted jellyfish include early life history stages of many commercially and recreationally important finfish, and the temporal/spatial distribution of Australian spotted jellyfish could drastically increase finfish larvae/egg mortality rates if spawning events coincide with swarm activities. Similarly, the Bocourt swimming crab could compete for resources of the native blue crab. The current status of the Australian spotted jellyfish and the Bocourt swimming crab, however, does not indicate that these two invasive species pose an imminent concern. Similarly, *H. invemar* and *P. viridis* do not appear to pose an immediate threat, but their distribution and abundance should be monitored to ensure early detection of proliferation. However, the Asian tiger shrimp, *Penaeus monodon*, and red lionfish, *Pterois volitans/miles* continue to be invasives of heightened concern, and their broadened distribution and increased abundance warrants concern.

The Asian tiger shrimp (*Penaeus monodon*) has been a species of concern since 2006 when it was first observed in Alabama's inshore waters (Mississippi Sound). After the first individual was documented, captures of *P. monodon* have incrementally increased. A confirmed report of a single specimen caught near Middle Bay Light occurred in 2008, followed by five confirmed reports in 2009. From 2006 to 2009, the distribution of *P. monodon* was primarily restricted to Alabama's southern inshore waters. However, its distribution extended to northern Mobile Bay and into Perdido and Wolf Bays in 2011. The forty-three confirmed reports during 2011 indicate the Asian tiger shrimp occurs within all of Alabama's primary estuary basins. However, the concern for *P. monodon* has decreased within the commercial shrimping community which has resulted in fewer validated reports. Alabama Marine Resources Division received fewer validated

reports in recent years than in previous years, but personnel communications between AMRD and commercial shrimpers indicate a significant abundance of *P. monodon* occur within Alabama waters despite the reduction in validated reports. Based upon the temporal and spatial abundance of *P. monodon* encounters and reported sightings (despite lower perceived importance of Asian tiger shrimp since 2013), evidence suggests the Asian tiger shrimp has become established in Alabama's waters.

Like recent reports of the Asian Tiger Shrimp, encounters with lionfish typically are unknown unless AMRD representatives actively seek potential observers (i.e. dive shops, spearfishing tournament organizers, etc). The first report, which was unvalidated, was from a 2009 observation made by a recreational SCUBA diver at an area of natural hard-bottom about 20 nautical miles south-southeast of Orange Beach named Trysler Grounds. The first confirmed report was documented in June 2011 by a spear fisherman who collected an individual from an oil/gas platform approximately 43 miles south of Dauphin Island. Numerous unconfirmed reports of lionfish have been made to various government agencies that indicate lionfish were rather abundant on the Trysler Grounds in 2011. SCUBA divers reported observing up to 30 individuals during single dives in this area during the 2011 dive season. However, unconfirmed reports from SCUBA divers from 2012-2013 indicate lionfish abundance had increased from previous levels. A recreational diver reported observing upwards of 60 individual lionfish during a dive at Trysler during the 2012 dive season, although the observer did not know when he made the observation or even an approximate location within the Trysler Grounds reef complex. Similarly, a SCUBA diver reported observing up to 100 individual lionfish during a dive at an artificial pyramid reef during June 2012. Unfortunately, the diver would not disclose any information about where the observation was made. Similarly, unconfirmed reports are being made by SCUBA divers that indicate lionfish are widespread throughout Alabama's artificial reef permit zone. However, 26 lionfish were donated to AMRD after a lionfish rodeo in June and July 2012 by a local dive shop. Unfortunately the rodeo coordinator did not attempt to obtain collection information about the lionfish, and only retained specimens for AMRD if the participant volunteered to relinquish the lionfish for scientific studies.

Alabama Marine Resources Division received a grant from Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) in December 2012 to monitor reef communities in the Gulf of Mexico, dispatch red lionfish when encountered during SCUBA surveys, increase public awareness of the lionfish invasion, and streamline the general coordination between State agencies, Federal agencies, and the public. Eighteen dive surveys were completed by AMRD personnel during 2013 and t-shirts were distributed to members of the SCUBA community that were active in submitting reports, samples, and increasing public awareness.

Additional funding was secured from GSMFC to continue the monitoring in 2014 and continue increasing public awareness. AMRD personnel conducted SCUBA surveys at 18 reef sites in 2014 and created an Adopt-a-Reef program that emphasizes the reporting and capturing of lionfish. The Adopt-a-Reef program features a web-based application that allows for the submission and viewing of reports collected by Adopt-a-Reef participants. To date, 39 members of the public are enrolled in the Adopt-a-Reef program and 47 reports have been generated by the Program's members.

In conclusion, the validity of a portion of lionfish reports have historically been questionable, and the ratio of giant tiger prawn that are rumored to have been caught to the amount of reports received by State agencies is relatively high. For example, native finfish with an intriguing appearance often seem to be confused with lionfish. Similarly, unsubstantiated rumors of shrimpers routinely catching giant tiger prawn throughout Mobile and Baldwin County exist yet relatively few are reported. Therefore, educating the public is paramount to obtaining quality information. The DCNR/MRD continues their efforts to enhance public awareness of these two

invasives. Participation in additional lionfish derbies and the promotion of the Adopt-a-Reef program is expected to result in routine extermination efforts at important reefs.