

LIONFISH – an Invasive Marine Species



Red Lionfish (*Pterois volitans*)

In February 2008 a juvenile Red Lionfish was removed from a dive site in Little Cayman and since then many others have been removed from Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. While it may seem exciting to see this fish on a dive it is quite disturbing when you realize that this species was only supposed to be found in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

So what's it doing in the Atlantic Ocean? While no one knows exactly how they arrived in the Atlantic, the most accepted method is the accidental or intentional release of aquarium fish into the marine environment. Lionfish are now established along the entire US East Coast from Florida through Massachusetts, east to Bermuda and throughout the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico in depths ranging from 1 to 1,000 feet!

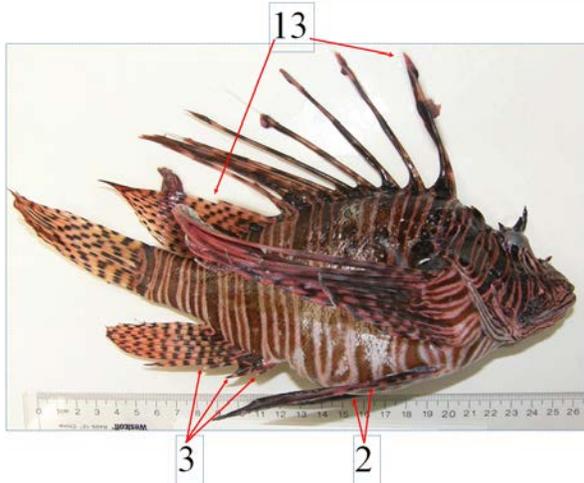


Red dots show locations of lionfish

Allowing lionfish to establish themselves in our waters can lead to serious problems because they are:

- Ravenous predators being shown to eat juvenile fish and crustaceans (shrimps, crabs, etc.) in large quantities.
- Not known to have many native predators
- Equipped with venomous spines which deter predators and can cause painful wounds in humans.
- Capable of reproducing at a rate of 30,000 eggs every four days
- Able to reproduce at less than 1 year old.
- Relatively resistant to parasites, giving them another advantage over native species.
- Fast in their growth, able to outgrow most native species with whom they compete for food and space.

It is well established that red lionfish will stand their ground when harassed and, when threatened, can arch their backs, pointing their dorsal spines at the aggressor, and swim forward rapidly in order to inflict a sting. Poisoning of the hand from the venomous sting has been the most common injury. **It should also be stressed that serious wounds have also resulted from the careless handling of recently dead specimens.**



The lionfish has 18 venomous spines. 13 are on the top of the fish and the remaining 5 are on the bottom.

The sting of the red lionfish causes intense pain immediately and leads to several hours of extreme pain, depending upon the amount of venom received. To treat lionfish stings you should immerse the affected area in hot but non-scalding water for two to three hours and seek medical attention **immediately!**

When diving, especially in a wreck, cave or swim-through, be aware of the areas above you

as lionfish are able to rest, upside down, on the ceilings and walls of these features. Divers have been stung by lionfish they were not aware of.

If they are caught while fishing do not release them back into the ocean.

For these reasons the Department of Environment (DoE) has taken the stand that these fish must be removed from our waters, however, due to the venomous nature of the fish we ask that only licensed individuals attempt to cull them. If you are interested in being licensed, or learning more about the lionfish, please attend one of our training courses which are offered monthly. Contact us for more information or email us to be added to the notification list for future courses.

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