

THE DAILY



CARPE DIEM

Fishermen reeling in big profits in war against giant invaders from Asia



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Jason Arthurs for The Daily



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CARPALOOZA

Fishermen net big bucks as Washington hires them to stem aquatic invasion

By Erik German

Video by Vivek Kemp and Jonathan Tortora



OTTAWA, Ill. — Fast-breeding, slimy aliens have taken over the Midwest’s rivers, and some folks here are actually happy about it.

“Without them, I think we’d be a dying breed,” said Ron Brown, 64, a commercial fisherman who has worked the waterways of Illinois for decades. Behind him, in a flat-bottom fishing boat, lay his day’s catch — a gooey, 5,000-pound heap of invasive Asian carp.

These omnipresent fish rank among the worst environmental threats facing the Midwest, but along the front lines of their invasion, they are sparking an economic mini-boom. The federal government is throwing \$50 million at the problem this year, including generous bounties for the fishing industry. Meanwhile, entrepreneurial processors are cashing in on high demand for the fish abroad and placing bets on a burgeoning domestic market.

“We basically took a bad fish and turned it into a good fish,” said Lisa McKee, CEO of Big River Fish Corp., a Pearl, Ill., fish processing

plant that now owes 80 percent of its business to aquatic invaders infesting long stretches of the Ohio, Illinois and Missouri rivers.

Another processor, Schafer Fisheries in Thompson, Ill., sold 30 million pounds of carp last year, much of it ground for fertilizer or sliced into fillets. Although unpopular with Americans, bighead and silver carp are some of the most-consumed meats in China. The plant owner, Michael Schafer, 56, said he hopes to boost his profits by selling foreign buyers on his just-perfected formula for carp baloney and, of all things, carp hot dogs.

“China’s middle class is the size of the entire American population,” Schafer said after sampling one of the smoke-flavored wieners. “Think about that.”

Kevin Irons, a biologist with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, said Asian carp have proven especially lucrative for fleets of freshwater fishermen. “Some people on their own are making six figures just catching carp,”

CATCH OF THE DAY

Carp hot dogs!

Schafer Fisheries in Thompson, Ill., has designed a smoke-flavored carp frank that tastes convincingly hot-doggish.



Video by Vivek Kemp and Jonathan Tortora

Irons said.

Yet it's important to note why the fish remain irredeemably bad in the eyes of many river watchers. First there's the matter of the leaping.

When startled, densely packed schools of silver carp dart in all directions. Some of them leap out of the water, as much as 10 feet in the air. Boating quickly through carp-dense waters can be dangerous. Bruises and even broken teeth sometimes result from one of the few environmental threats in America that can literally hit you in the face.

"Think of someone throwing a 40-pound sandbag at you," Brennan Caputo, 26, said as he piloted an aluminum outboard on the Illinois River on a recent morning, scanning the murky water for fish. "I've taken one to the stomach, and one to the back. Haven't taken one to the head yet."

Since they first escaped from Southern fish

farms in the late 1970s, Asian carp have spread north, consuming up to 20 percent of their body weight in plankton and algae daily and breeding at a rate that makes rabbits look chaste.

Females carry as many as 2 million eggs at a time. Along some especially infested stretches of river, bighead and silver carp now account for as

"It's a stinky, bloody business, but it sure is fun."

- Shawn Price, carp fisherman

much as 90 percent of the fish in the water. The invaders crowd out native species and — with some adults weighing more than 50 pounds — they have few predators.

"They've left a trail of destruction as they've moved up the Mississippi River," said Charles



Wooley, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We theorize that would be replicated in the Great Lakes."

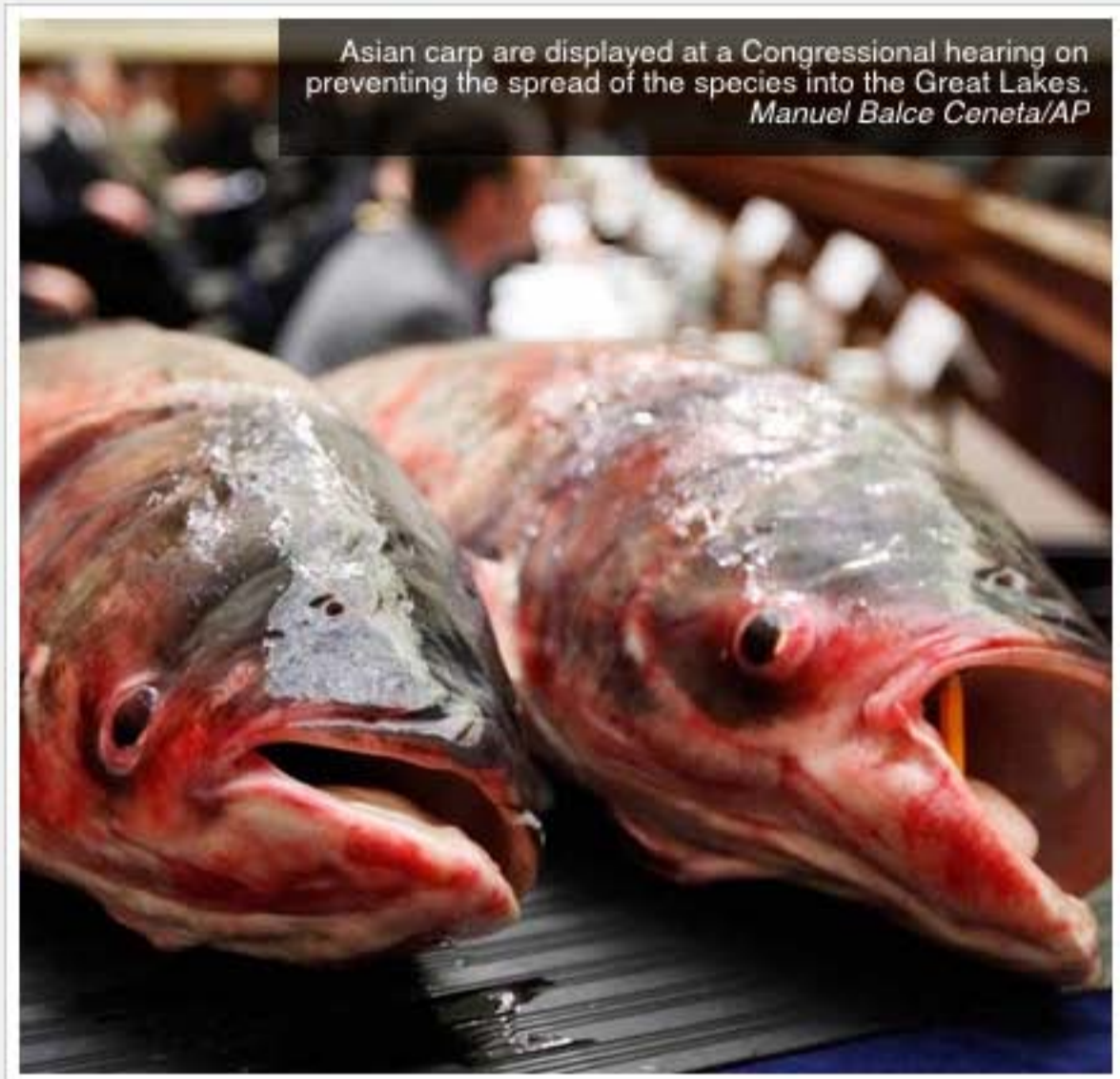
With a fishing industry valued at more than \$7 billion per year, the Great Lakes have plenty to lose if the carp take over. So far, there's little evidence to suggest that the invaders have passed through the Chicago Harbor Lock, the main gateway connecting the lakes to the infested south-lying river system. Whether their arrival would actually cause some kind of carp-ocalypse remains a matter of debate. Still, the federal government isn't taking chances.

"We have a war with Asian carp and we're fighting the primary battle south of Chicago," said John Goss, the White House-appointed "Asian carp czar" who heads the federal government's effort to eradicate the species.

The government spent \$100 million fighting carp in 2010 and 2011, Goss said. Illinois officials handed out more than \$9 million of that cash last year to help increase the carp catch, including a \$2 million grant to the Big River Fish Corp. for a plant expansion that will triple its processing capacity.

"We are continuing a constant fight," Goss said.

In America's war on carp, part of the "navy" is 10 commercial fishing teams paid by the government to catch as many of the invaders as they can. Shawn Price, 35, who has a 13-week contract this year to net Asian carp for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, is paid



Asian carp are displayed at a Congressional hearing on preventing the spread of the species into the Great Lakes. Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP

\$6,300 per week. After subtracting gas, motel and other expenses, he and his fishing partner split the profits.

Under the direction of state biologists, the government-funded teams drop gill nets as long as football fields along the river. Fishermen herd the carp by making noise, slapping the water with plungers or revving outboard motors until as many fish as possible become entangled in the nets.

Full nets are then hauled aboard and native species are thrown back, leaving a pile of enormous, flopping carp, oozing torrents of blood and fishy slime under stress. "It's a stinky, bloody business, but it sure is fun," Price said.

Government-funded carp-catchers represent only a fraction of the 350 or so active commercial fishing licenses in Illinois, but they're mak-



ing a dent in the invasion. In 2011, the program netted 700,000 pounds of carp, according to the Department of Natural Resources. The tally is already 120,000 pounds and counting in the first two months this year.

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But with some processors paying about 12 cents per pound for Asian carp and some Chinese wholesalers paying more than 90 cents, Department of Natural Resources officials say they hope the best long-term weapon against the fish will be the free market.

“It’s hard to put a bounty on the head of every

carp,” Irons said. “Industry will be taking more fish out this year than they ever have. I think this is going to be a key year.”

For third-generation fisherman Orion Briney, 53, there’s little need for a government bounty to make him chase the fish. On a recent afternoon, he calculated he’d pulled in 53,000 pounds of Asian carp in four days, adding, “And we’re getting ready to go out again tomorrow.”

Since Asian carp first hit the rivers around his hometown of Browning, Ill., about 10 years ago, Briney said, he gradually began to shift his business from the Buffalo fish his father once chased to the new invaders. “I just saw it coming,” he said.

Nowadays, ask Briney how big a part of his operation Asian carp have become, and there’s no hesitation.

“All of it,” he said. ■

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Judges count the catch at an Asian carp fishing contest being held in Bath, Ill. Benjamin Lowy/Getty Images