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Researchers Develop A Trap To Control Population Of Invasive Lionfish

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Heard on All Things Considered

GREG ALLEN

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Invasive lionfish, native to the Indian Ocean, have had a big impact on reef ecosystems in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. A new inexpensive trap may help control these voracious predators.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Lionfish are voracious predators. If left unchecked, they decimate fish populations. Since they're native to the Pacific, lionfish are problematic for coral reefs in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. NPR's Greg Allen reports researchers have developed a trap they believe will help control the invasive species.

GREG ALLEN, BYLINE: Lionfish are colorful and flamboyant, striped with venomous spiky fins. They've long been popular in saltwater aquariums and a couple of decades ago began showing up on coral reefs off Florida. Steve Gittings, the chief scientist for NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, says lionfish have now spread from the Carolinas to South America.

STEVE GITTINGS: Anything that swims by, they're willing to eat. So they can depopulate reefs really rapidly. And then they can reproduce in numbers that put rabbits to shame.

ALLEN: As lionfish have spread throughout the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, local divers have taken a big role in trying to protect native fish. Holden Harris is a postdoctoral researcher in fisheries ecology at the University of Florida.

HOLDEN HARRIS: In a lot of areas, the spearfishermen have done a really good job of protecting their reefs. Places like the Florida Keys - it's now hard to find lionfish in some of these frequently dived areas.

ALLEN: The problem is that divers typically don't go below 120 feet. Lionfish can be found much deeper, and some of the densest populations are in areas where divers can't get to. And that's where traps come in. Working over the last several years, Gittings has developed a trap that attracts lionfish and can be used in deep water. It looks like a hula hoop with a hinge that allows it to close like a clam shell. It's covered in netting. And when it's opened on the seafloor, in the middle of the trap is a plastic lattice that for some reason lionfish cannot resist.

GITTINGS: Lionfish tend to hunt in the morning and the evening. So they'll go off and hunt, and then they'll come back to the trap and just hang around it.

ALLEN: UF researcher Holden Harris tested the traps and published the results today in a new study that suggests they might be useful for commercial fishermen. Lionfish has become a popular menu item in many seafood restaurants. With a grant from NOAA, Gittings says a conservation group in the Florida Keys is now working with fishermen to try out the traps and see how much commercial potential there may be.

GITTINGS: Really, in the end, it involves us, you know, eating our way out of this problem. This is supplying a demand that we know is out there. People love lionfish. It's very good.

ALLEN: With the traps, researchers hope to develop the market for lionfish and, at the same time, protect native fish and the coral reefs that are at risk.

Greg Allen, NPR News, Miami.

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