

Sea Grant Files, February 2, 2016
Surrender Now! An Option for Unwanted Fish

Hi. I'm Jesse Schomberg and you're listening to the Sea Grant Files.

If a goldfish grows to accommodate its environment, what happens when it gets released into rivers, lakes and ponds? Freakishly large goldfish, the size of a dinner plate, have been caught in waterways in the Great Lakes region.

People dumping the contents of their aquariums and goldfish bowls is a problem in the U.S. and around the world. People are sometimes unsure about what to do when faced with unwanted fish or other aquarium inhabitants. What they should NOT do is dump fish and plants into the nearest waterbody. One or two fish can make a difference. Non-native species can become invasive, reproducing quickly and ruining both habitat and dinnertime for native animals.

That's why Minnesota Sea Grant teamed up with the Minnesota Aquarium Society last month to hold their first-ever Habitattitude Aquarium Fish and Plant Surrender event. The goal was to create a convenient option for owners to part with their unwanted fish and aquarium plants so that they wouldn't release them into the environment.

"We had 32 "surrenders," said "Andy Jameson of the Minnesota Aquarium Society. "That was a much greater number than I had anticipated. A few of the fish also came with small tanks and food. Goldfish predominated, but there were also cichlids, common plecos, platys and a sun catfish," he said.

As the surrendered fish came rolling in, they were bagged, tagged, and sold to the highest bidder. Every item surrendered was purchased by someone at the auction.... save one....a goldfish that was clearly sick was euthanized so it would not make other fish sick.

Speaking of goldfish, did you know that they were first introduced in the U.S. by the United States Commission on Fisheries in 1878? The newly formed Commission used goldfish as a publicity stunt, offering free goldfish brought from Japan to residents in Washington DC. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the fish were bred in ponds in Washington and Baltimore, and anyone who sent a request through a member of Congress could receive one, along with a glass globe to keep it in. At its height, the campaign was distributing 20,000 fish annually. In the 20th century, goldfish became a common prize at county fairs.

The innocent fun associated with the flowery goldfish has resulted in unanticipated consequences. Dumped into waterways or washed away from private ponds, goldfish and koi find their way into rivers and lakes, where they can hybridize with their common carp cousins that were brought to America from Europe in the early 19th century. These fish root around in the sediment to feed, ruining habitat for native species as they scour the

bottom for food. They vacuum up organic matter and leave very little behind for the foraging fish that actually belong there. They can even eliminate frogs from an area by eating tadpoles.

One of the most wild, wild goldfish stories that played out over that last year involved an estimated 4,000 goldfish in Colorado's Teller Lake #5. The lake made national headlines as a horrible warning of what can happen when released domestic fish run amok. And then, in a happy turn of events, it made headlines again as white pelicans gobbled the goldies even as field crews were gathering data. Wildlife officials had considered fairly drastic measures to rid the lake of goldfish, from electro-shocking to draining the whole body of water. However, in the end, a predatory bird saved the day. "It appears that pelicans have made quick work of most of the goldfish, so we don't need to do anything," Colorado Parks and Wildlife spokeswoman Jennifer Churchill told the Daily Camera last April. "I imagine they have good eyes and saw those fish from above."

Sans pelicans on the UMD campus, a drastic measure to eliminate a goldfish problem was taken. In 2004, Rock Pond was drained to clear it of hundreds of goldfish. While not as nasty as the snakehead fish or piranhas, goldfish are just as illegal to release into local waterways.

Offering surrender events is becoming a component of Habitattitude, a national public awareness campaign to help aquarium and water garden owners become part of the solution to prevent the release of aquatic fish and plants. The campaign's logo and "don't release" message appears on fish bags, new aquariums, and elsewhere. It's a cooperative effort involving pet and water garden industries, and many others. The recent surrender event helped re-home over 100 fish, making it a resounding success.

"We could not have been more pleased with how the surrender event turned out", said Sea Grant's Marte Kitson, who helped coordinate the event. "We are looking forward to holding a similar event in Duluth later in 2016. We are partnering with Roger Hill from the Snake Pit and Animal Allies to host a reptile surrender event. If we can find a partner to help us re-home fish, we will be taking fish surrenders as well."

This episode of the Sea Grant Files was produced by Jennifer Gasperini, Sharon Moen, Mariah Schumacher and, me, Jesse Schomberg. For more information, or to listen to other episodes of the Sea Grant Files, visit Minnesota Sea Grant at www.seagrants.umn.edu. You can also follow Minnesota Sea Grant on Facebook or Twitter. Thanks for listening!