



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 5, 2006

POPULATION EXPLOSION - THE LIONFISH INVASION! *Collecting Expedition led by Aquarist Yields High Numbers*

In two weeks of collecting, Atlantis Marine World Aquarist Todd Gardner, along with local divers, has amassed nearly 200 juvenile lionfish, measuring between one and two inches long. Gardner had previously encountered the fish on earlier collecting expeditions but never in such quantities.

"My first year collecting I found two lionfish after searching all summer. My second year, I found ten, again after many dives searching all summer," Gardner explains. "This year, on my first dive, I found 11. Since then, it has become common to find 30 or more on each dive. Clearly there is a population explosion of sorts."

A native of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) was first discovered in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Florida soon after Hurricane Andrew. And although it is not known for certain, scientists speculate that aquarium hobbyists introduced the initial lionfish.

"We may never know how lionfish came to inhabit the Atlantic Ocean, and their impact, if any, on their new ecosystem may not be clear for many years...however, there are some things we should keep in mind," Gardner warns. "One is that the introduction of non-indigenous species into new locales is widely considered to be second only to habitat destruction as a cause of extinction."

In collaboration with scientists at the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the University of North Carolina, Gardner is now participating in research that will enhance the understanding of lionfish biology and the nature of biological invasions and how they might impact the ecosystem.

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The lionfish is a saltwater predator of small fish, shrimp, and crabs. Their visually striking yet delicate patterns of distinctive maroon and white stripes and fan-like fins draw attention to their venomous nature. Because there are no known predators of lionfish in the Atlantic Ocean, Gardner fears that their population will continue to grow very rapidly, making them a serious threat to native species.

Atlantis Marine World will display about 60 of the juvenile lionfish that have been collected as part of its Treasure Room exhibits. Visitors will also find larger, more matured lionfish measuring nearly 15 inches in the Aquarium's Shipwreck Tank.

Atlantis Marine World, Long Island's own full-scale Aquarium, is located in downtown Riverhead on 3.2 acres along the scenic Peconic River. By capturing our visitors' imaginations and emphasizing the importance of marine life and environmental conservation and preservation, Atlantis Marine World's mission is to provide visitors with an interactive and exciting educational experience. Atlantis Marine World is also the home of The Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation, New York's only authorized marine mammal and sea turtle rescue and rehabilitation center.

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