



Invasive Species Program

Snakeheads - The Newest Aquatic Invader

What Are Snakeheads?

Recently, a non-native air-breathing freshwater fish known as a Snakehead has generated national media attention as the latest invasive species to threaten native fish and wildlife resources and the economic sectors that depend on them. In scientific terms, snakeheads are divided into two distinct genera:

- * *Channa* (snakeheads of Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia), and
- * *Parachanna* (African snakeheads).

What Do They Look Like?

Snakeheads look very similar to the North American native Bowfin. Within the two genera, twenty-eight separate species are recognized; however, due to similar physical characteristics, these species are difficult to differentiate.



USGS Photo - *Channa argus*

Overall, these fish are long and cylindrical with enlarged scales on their head, hence the common name of snakehead. They have a large mouth with a protruding lower jaw that typically contains canine-like teeth. Their coloration and size vary, with the largest one recorded being four feet in length.

Where Are They From?

As a family, snakeheads have a native range that includes parts of Asia and Africa. However, fisheries scientists have found four species in the U.S. in the states of California, Florida,

Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland and Rhode Island. Reproducing populations have been documented in Florida and Maryland.

How Did They Get Here?

Experts agree that the various species most likely came into the U.S. via two different pathways. Due to the presence of specific species, experts believe that some entered U.S. waters via releases by aquarium owners and some via the live food fish trade by individuals releasing these fish to establish a local food source.

Currently, snakeheads are being sold in live fish food markets and some restaurants in Boston and New York. Live specimens have been confiscated by authorities in Alabama, California, Florida, Texas and Washington, all states where possession of these fish is illegal. Also, snakeheads are readily available for purchase over the Internet.



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission photo