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Third 'N.C.' lionfish caught offshore

'Pretty good proof' predator's here to stay, researcher says

BY GARETH MCGRATH
Staff Writer

The foreign creature with the feather-like spines stared out from the fish tank at UNCW's Center for Marine Science.

"With this one and the increased number of sightings, I think it's pretty good proof that these things are here to stay," said research technician David Wells. He was talking about Leo, as researchers have dubbed the lionfish – a beautiful but potentially harmful stranger to the waters off our coast.

Lionfish sightings off the coast of North Carolina, although still extremely rare, have been on the rise for years.

That has researchers worried about what impact the top predator in its native environment might have on critters that sit high on the food chain on this side of the world.

Only two "North Carolina" specimens have previously been captured, in part because of the deep waters the interloper from the Pacific and Indian oceans inhabits.

Researchers from the Coastal Ocean Research and Monitoring Program, an arm of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration based at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, had seen the poisonous exotic fish hanging around their submerged instruments on previous dives.

"We saw him again on our way down this time, but didn't have time to mess with him," said fellow

research technician Morgan Bailey.

But with a few minutes left in their air tanks, the divers decided Wednesday to try to catch the colorful fish.

Using a flipper, Mr. Bailey and diver Steve Hall corralled the lionfish into a mesh bag and then aboard the *R/V Cape Fear*.

Venom rarely fatal

"We were definitely careful," Mr. Bailey said, alluding to the fish's poisonous spines. "But we were more excited than anything else."

The lionfish's venom can produce localized and abdominal pains, but fatalities are rare.

Caught in roughly 130-foot-deep water 50 miles off Masonboro Inlet, the fish's location corresponds to past lionfish sightings, said Paula Whitfield, a biologist with the NOAA lab in Beaufort.

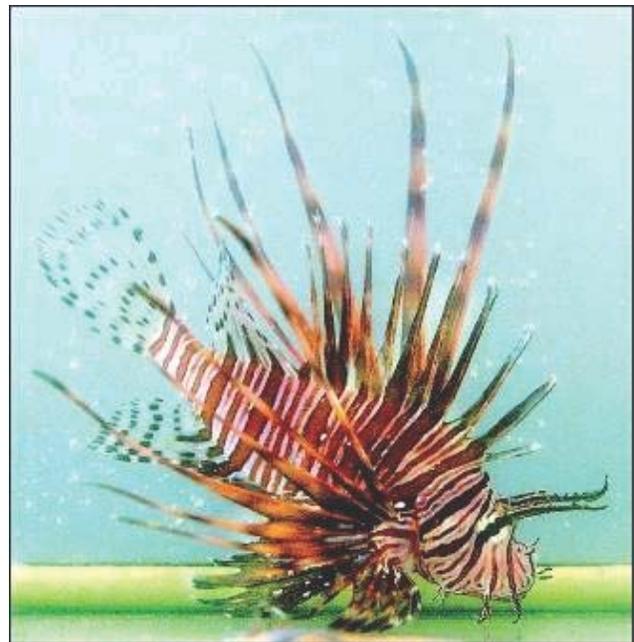
It also is the second report of lionfish skulking around submerged instrument stations in an otherwise barren, sandy stretch of ocean bottom.

"What that tells me is that they're probably everywhere at that depth," Ms. Whitfield said.

But she said an even more noteworthy – and potentially worrisome – observation is that the fish was caught in the middle of winter.

Worrisome impact

That probably ends any question as to whether the fish is established



STAFF PHOTO | GREG WOLF

Divers captured this lionfish Wednesday 50 miles off the North Carolina coast.

and wintering here, Ms. Whitfield said, noting the fish can't survive in an environment much colder than the 63-degree waters in which it was found.

It also raises the question of what impact the hunter might be having here on other apex predators who might not know what to make of the spiny *pterois volitans*.

"Their arrival could crowd out smaller groupers, snappers and other reef-dwelling species, but we just don't know at this point," Ms. Whitfield said.

Theories abound as to how the fish, a warm-water creature normally found in the oceans off South-

east Asia and Australia, reached the North Carolina coast.

It could have been brought to U.S. waters in ballast water carried by merchant ships traveling from the Far East. Ballast is used to stabilize ships during transit.

But Ms. Whitefield said a more plausible guess is the foreign fish, which is popular with aquarium owners, was released into the ocean and rode the Gulf Stream up the coast.

Staring at the 6-inch-long lionfish, Mr. Bailey said UNCW plans to put Leo on display in the center's lobby.

"It's not something you see out here every day," he said.