

Contact: Jana Goldman
(301) 713-2483

NOAA04-RXXX
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 14, 2004

RESEARCHERS PLAN AUGUST HUNT FOR INVASIVE LIONFISH OFF CAROLINA COAST

Scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will lead a diving expedition off the North Carolina coast August 2-20 to learn more about a beautiful but venomous predatory fish whose population appears to be growing along Florida, North Carolina and waters off Bermuda. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The Indo-Pacific lionfish, *pterois volitans*, over the past four years has established itself as the first Pacific marine fish known to populate Atlantic waters, particularly around reefs off the southeast United States. An aquarium fish popular for its brilliant colors, the venomous lionfish most likely was introduced to Atlantic waters by intentional or unintentional releases from aquariums.

Scientist Paula Whitfield of NOAA's Center for Coastal Fisheries and Habitat Research, in Beaufort, N.C., will lead the diving expedition sponsored by the NOAA Undersea Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) to hunt and collect lionfish off the coast to better understand its ecology and its potential impacts on native fish communities.

"These beautiful, but unwelcome visitors pose potential risks both to people and to their new marine environment," says Whitfield.

She cautions that catching a lionfish may cause painful stings from the fish's neurotoxins, and that other fish species can be paralyzed when stung by lionfish. With most observations of lionfish occurring in waters more than 100 feet deep, divers and those fishing in deep waters are most likely to have encounters with the fish.

Along with divers and those fishing, lionfish are believed to pose particular risks to the local environment. The invasive lionfish have few if any natural predators in their new Atlantic environment. They are voracious predators that feed on small shrimp to large fishes, including the young of important commercial fish species such as snapper and grouper. These commercial fish use the region's "live bottom" reefs as nursery grounds.

Using deep water SCUBA diving supported by NOAA's Undersea Research Center at UNCW, the scientists will describe where the lionfish are living and who they are living with, including their prey and potential predators. They are known to be a tropical Pacific fish. Ms. Whitfield will seek to answer how can they tolerate and reproduce in the sub-tropical to temperate conditions off the Carolinas.

The scientists will use remote camera surveys to estimate lionfish densities and allow year-to-year comparisons. Those surveys also will provide valuable baseline data on native fish diversity. Using known lionfish temperature tolerances and bottom-water temperature data, the scientists hope to be able to more accurately predict potential geographic distribution. They will use lionfish specimens to better understand reproductive status, diet, size, age and other genetic information.

"There's been little research directly examining the impacts of a marine fish in an open marine system," Whitfield said. "We hope our research can lead to improved understanding of the lionfish invasion and its consequences, and improve scientific understanding of fish invasions overall."

Scuba divers and others experiencing lionfish sightings are encouraged to contact Whitfield immediately at (252) 728-8746 or paula.whitfield@noaa.gov. She hopes to receive location coordinates, depth information and, if possible, photographs or video. Divers and fishermen should not try to capture fish due to risk of being stung.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through research to better understand atmospheric and climate variability and to manage wisely our nation's coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

NOAA: www.noaa.gov

NOTE TO EDITORS AND REPORTERS:

For additional information, contact Whitfield or, with questions concerning the technologies being used, Andrew Shepard, NOAA Undersea Research Center at UNCW, at 910-962-2446, sheparda@uncw.edu. Web logs, photographs, and video clips from the cruise will be posted online at the NOAA Beaufort Lab Web site: <http://shrimp.ccfhrb.noaa.gov/lionfish/> and the NURC/UNCW Web site: <http://www.uncw.edu/nurc>