



Stalking *Snakeheads*

Summer in Washington, DC, can be brutal — hazy, hot and humid. But that didn't stop 100 hunters from gathering one steamy, overcast July day on the banks of the Potomac River to track down a menacing predator that had emerged in their midst.

Their quarry, the voracious northern snakehead fish, which has no business being outside of southeast Asia, threatened to eat its way through the Potomac's food chain and disrupt the entire ecological balance of the Potomac. And the hunters — anglers, actually — weren't going to let that happen. After all, many of them, professional and novice alike, had worked hard to restore “the nation's river” to prominence as a world-class bass fishery.

The threat of losing it is what brought them out for the first-ever Snakehead Roundup, a fishing tournament created by the Marina Operators Association of America (MOAA) to draw attention and political muscle to the overall problem of aquatic nuisance species, according to

MOAA's Mari Lou Livingood, the event organizer.

“Whether it's zebra mussels from the Black Sea invading the Great Lakes, mitten crabs from Asia taking over San Francisco Bay or Asian carp disrupting the food web in Midwestern rivers, invasives are a multi-billion dollar problem,” Livingood explained.

BoatU.S., the National Marine Manufacturers Association and West Marine joined MOAA to cosponsor the July 30 event, with assistance from The Nature

Conservancy. Roundup headquarters, Columbia Island Marina, proved a good venue for the tournament as federal and state officials mingled with anglers and the

Washington, DC, media turned out in force.

The site lent its own symbolism to the cause, too. The marina is on federal land, in the shadow of the Pentagon — hey, this is war! — and across the river from the Jefferson Memorial — yes, there's a political element to the battle. An important bill that can put teeth in aquatic nuisance species policy will be introduced, and hopefully

passed, in the next Congress.

Symbolism aside, the snakehead is a good invader to target, Livingood explained, because they threaten not just the ecosystem in the Potomac but the local economy, as well. Bass fishing has become big business on the once-polluted river.

At least 19 adult snakeheads had been caught in the vicinity since April, including spawning females.

Frankenfish

No one knows exactly when the northern snakehead entered the U.S., nor how, but it is a popular aquarium species around the world and eaten as a delicacy in China. In the northeast U.S., the invasion came to light over two years ago when an angler fishing in a small Maryland pond just outside the nation's capital caught an unfamiliar fish.

To get a positive ID, he contacted the state department of natural resources and — uh, oh! — bad news. The odd-looking fish turned out to be a northern snakehead, a fish with a sharp-toothed smile and a mean appetite to boot, and it didn't belong in that ecosystem.



Northern Snakehead, a.k.a “Frankenfish”



Jim Frye, of the Marina Operators Association of America, presents the Youngest Angler Award to 2-year-old Olivia Woo. Holding her is Mari Lou Livingood who organized the Snakehead Roundup.

way right up the food chain and kill this fishery.”

Right now, nobody knows how to rid the Potomac of Frankenfish, Chaconas says, but bass anglers are eager to do anything and everything they can to help.

One of his volunteers for the day, Maryland tournament angler Jim Stubbs, took Philip Andreozzi of the Department of Interior’s National Invasive Species Council out on the river.

“It’s great to see so many anglers involved in something that affects them,” Andreozzi said. “Media attention like what we have here has worked elsewhere to spread the word about other invasive aquatic species like the zebra mussel. The public outreach of this event makes it a success whether we catch 100 snakeheads or one.”

Andreozzi wasn’t far off the mark. The number of snakeheads caught that day: zero. But fish or no, as anglers returned to the docks, TV crews eagerly interviewed them. Though no one had any great fish

The department took major steps to eradicate what they hoped was a contained threat. They poisoned the pond and drained it, and that should have been the end of the story. But whether it’s because this alien fish can walk on land with its super-strong pectoral fins and survive out of water for hours at a time, or because more had been released — accidentally or intentionally — into other water bodies, it wasn’t long before anglers were reeling them in at neighboring lakes and eventually, in the Potomac River. “Frankenfish” was here, with a vengeance.

That’s when the boating industry decided it was time to get serious and with some funding from West Marine, they hit on the “roundup” as a way to get the word out. It was the kick-off of a campaign to use marinas nationwide as focal points to enlist boaters and anglers to help with prevention and eradication efforts aimed at other aquatic nuisance species.

Take a VIP Fishing

Like most official Washington, DC, events, the Snakehead Roundup began with breakfast and speeches from government officials involved in the issue. Soon though, eager anglers were heading out on the water. Some were in center console fishing boats but most were in bass boats. In fact, Steve Chaconas, an outspoken bass fisherman who hosts a fishing program on local radio enlisted 12 serious bass anglers who know the river to take government officials out on the hunt.

How did he get such an eager turnout of tournament anglers? Easy.

“This river is one of the top five bass fisheries in the U.S.,” said Chaconas, who is also a full-time guide on the Potomac and a popular speaker on the BoatU.S. Speaker’s Bureau circuit. “The snakehead is a big concern for all of us because it could work its



Media feeding frenzy: A reporter interviews Maryland bass angler Cliff Magnus who landed a 24-1/2-inch snakehead in June, the largest reported in the Potomac to date.

tales to share, a number of anglers won prizes donated by Bass Pro Shops for things like “youngest angler,” “best-looking angler,” and the angler who traveled the farthest.

One lucky participant drew the winning ticket for a Lowe 1652T jon boat and 25-hp Mercury motor on a trailer, donated by Brunswick Corp.

For more information on aquatic nuisance species and how you can help “stop aquatic hitchhikers,” go to: www.ProtectYourWaters.net. ■

— By Meredith Fitzpatrick and Ryck Lydecker

onwatch

BoatU.S. staff has taken leadership positions in a wide range of organizations, associations and councils to ensure that BoatU.S. members — as well as the boating public — are fully represented on public policy issues.

Some of the major organizations with which BoatU.S. is involved are listed below:

- American Boat & Yacht Council, Chairman and Technical Information Division Director
- American League of Anglers & Boaters, Executive Board, Past President
- Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- Association for Rescue at Sea, Board of Directors
- Atlantic Intercoastal Waterway Association, Board of Directors
- Boating Writers International, President
- International Association of Marine Investigators, President
- National Association of State Boating Law Administrators
- National Boating Safety Advisory Council, U.S. Coast Guard, federal appointee
- National Fire Protection Association 302 Committee
- National Safe Boating Council, Treasurer, two past chairmen
- National Sea Scouting Committee, Board of Directors
- National Women’s Sailing Association, Board of Directors
- NOAA Hydrographic Services Review Panel, federal appointee
- Recreational Boaters of California, Board of Directors
- Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, Board of Directors
- Recreational Roundtable
- Sportfishing and Boating Partnership Council, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service federal appointee
- Underwriters Laboratories/USCG Life Jacket Standards Committee
- U.S. Coast Guard Task Force on Global Maritime Distress and Safety System, Chair, Recreational Vessel Group