

Invasive Species in Wisconsin



Round gobies threaten native fish in Wisconsin and the Great Lakes

The State of Wisconsin is under attack by non-indigenous, invasive species. These are organisms that have been intentionally or accidentally transported beyond their natural range, and that negatively impact the economy, environment, or human health in their new homes. Unwanted invaders arrive via many means, from the ballast water of ocean going ships, to packing and shipping material associated with cargo, to intentional introductions, to accidental escape or release from aquaria and nursery facilities. Currently, little stands in the way of future invasions.

As a Great Lakes state, Wisconsin has a long history with invasive species, and is home to many unwanted invaders. Round Gobies occupy spawning habitat and consume the eggs of native fish in Lake Superior and Lake Michigan. Eurasian ruffe, another species damaging to native fisheries, are established in the lakes and throughout the state. This species is expected to reduce the value of Great Lakes fisheries by \$119 million. Aquatic nuisance plants like purple loosestrife and Eurasian water milfoil are present throughout the state, clogging waterways, reducing habitat for native fish and waterfowl, and interfering with hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities.

Asian Carp are another looming threat from an aquatic invader. Having escaped into the Mississippi from aquaculture ponds in the south, these fish have traveled north to the doorstep of the Great Lakes. Asian carp can grow to great size, and are capable of consuming large amounts of algae and zooplankton. If Asian carp reach the Great Lakes, they could severely impact native fish by consuming much of the available food.

Other invaders create a severe nuisance for industry and public utilities, in addition to harmful impacts on native habitats and food webs. Species like the zebra mussel foul and clog water intakes and pipes for factories and power plants. Zebra mussels were first introduced to the Great Lakes in 1988. Millions have been spent since then to control the species in factories, power plants, and water treatment facilities.

Invasive species in Wisconsin don't stop at the waters edge. Native plants in Wisconsin's forests are at risk from an invasion of Garlic mustard. This plant aggressively out-competes native wildflowers by dominating soil, light, and nutrient resources. Wildlife that depends on native plants for food are impacted by the infestation, as well. Another invasive plant, buckthorn, forms dense thickets that crowd out and deprive native plants of light.

The door to invasions remains wide open, as current prevention measures are proving inadequate. The impact of future invaders is impossible to predict. In the absence of effective measures to prevent and control invasions, Wisconsin's environment, economy, and its citizens' public health will remain at risk.