



The CRAYFISH TALE

CRAYFISH – GOOD OR BAD

When I was a kid I found crayfish nothing but good. Except maybe when they pinched my fingers. Crayfish were always considered an asset to social activities, culminating in great festive dinners with colored lights and bibs and drinking songs on patios under an August moon. Crayfish were not only desirable; they were even considered 'noble' in those days.

How things have changed! Starting out believing good and favorable things about crayfish, I have come to realize that all is not well. Crayfish devotees still rank crayfish among the most delectable of crustaceans, and they, no, we, sit down with great anticipation to a tasty repast when crayfish are on the menu.

Crayfish are entirely harmless as they lie there, red shelled and aromatic in their dill flavors or Zatarain's spicy crab boil. But the story turns ugly when you take a look at what happens in lakes and rivers around our country, yes, even around the world.

Much controversy centers on whether the crayfish in question is native or ALIEN. While Swedes, of which I once was one,

used to consider all crayfish harmless and part of the natural balance in the world, things have changed. After the crayfish population in the Old World suffered a serious setback due to the crayfish pest, a fungal disease that eliminated large populations of their native crayfish, new species of crayfish were introduced. Unfortunately, the new species that were introduced into several European countries, including Sweden and England, were both the California Signal crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*) and the Louisiana long clawed swamp crawfish (*Procambarus clarkii*), which carried the dreaded fungal disease. As both varieties were larger and more aggressive, omnivores and faster growing than the natives, they became competitors to those who had lived in these waters for ages. They became invasive.

Biologists are well aware of this problem among practically all species in the world. When a new species is introduced into an area of biological balance, all sorts of dangerous results can be expected. The new species tend to take over. They invade the new territory and push out the old timers, the native populations. This is not just common among crayfish. It happens all over the range of liv-

ing organisms, from bacteria in our bodies to the spread of Homo sapiens all over the world. Apparently the Neanderthals were no match for the invading Cro Magnons who had larger brains. Often the invaders either find no enemies in their new habitat or they bring in new diseases that tend to kill the natives who have less resistance.

A similar situation has happened among crayfish. As the American imports into Europe started spreading, more virile as they were, the native species started dwindling either because they succumbed to the disease that the newcomers brought, or because they were simply pushed out or even eaten up. Crayfish have the unpleasant habit of practicing cannibalism. This is exactly what is happening in many European countries, Sweden included, and while those who feast on crayfish find it acceptable, biologists, believing in the balance in nature, are dismayed.

The United States has not been spared. Arizona, which has few natural waterways, had no crayfish until several artificial lakes were built. At first these artificial lakes became the new home of both imported fish and marine plants to everybody's delight. Game fish like bass and trout were introduced, and the fishing enthusiasts were happy. The fact that these game fishes were not native, did not bother anyone as long as they took the worm and got caught on the hook.

Then some fishermen decided to use live bait to catch their fish. They introduced cray-

fish. Some of these bait crawdads escaped; some were dumped in the lake after a day's fishing was done. Not surprisingly, crayfish took off and spread. In some lakes they spread so well, so quickly and with such vitality that they started showing up on fishing hooks instead of the expected game fish. Fishermen took notice and complaints started coming in to Game and Fish Departments in Arizona and other states.

Yes, the invasion was soon in full swing. Lakes that used to boast of rich marine plants and aquatic life started showing signs of decline. Crayfish, being omnivores, like to eat just about anything, including plant life. Even game fish, if not quick enough to wiggle away from the pinch of a crayfish claw, started biting the dust. My own recollection of finding a stringer of fish, cooling in the lake after a successful trip, being devoured by myriads of hungry crayfish, brought the invasion problem to a point.

In Arizona, the invaders attacked game fish and plants in lakes. In other states, where a native crayfish population existed, a more serious situation ensued. The invading crayfish, such as the rusty crayfish of the Great Lakes area, took on the native populations of crayfish. Those natives were often smaller, less virile and more docile. They were even pushed out of their protective hiding places by the aggressive Rusties. A noticeable decimation of the natives could be determined; some times even up to extermination. Even in African Madagascar have invading crayfish made native species scoot for their lives in the rice fields.

This invasion, as said before, was applauded by some as it meant more crayfish in the crayfish traps and on the dining tables. I was undoubtedly among those who found some advantages to this crustaceous invasion. But biologists did not share that opinion, and for good reasons. After all, we all understand the value of a balance in nature as well as among people. Wouldn't it be nice if we 'could all get along'?

So the invading crayfish push out the natives. That's bad, but there is more. Some crayfish also have some other unpleasant habits. The swamp crayfish builds chimneys. Sounds weird, but those of us who have nice manicured grass lawns near lakes or rivers that also harbor this southern crawfish know what it means; Ugly eyesores in the lawn that don't look very inviting for garden entertainment. Tunneling crayfish can also make earthen dams unsafe while letting the dam water percolate out where it isn't supposed to. Many a backyard pond has this way become unexpectedly drained.

In some Arizona waters, biologists have reported declines in turtles, frogs and fish after non-native crayfish show up; sometimes unbalancing the aquatic ecosystem. Some lakes that used to have ample green marine growth have turned into lifeless mud holes.

The United Kingdom, which like Sweden imported the signal crayfish from California, has found a host of problems especially for their native white claw crayfish, but also because the American crayfish, although immune to it themselves, have introduced more of the dreaded crayfish pest. In many waterways, the only remaining crayfish are hordes of the signals; Much to the delight of crayfish eaters, of course. Ironically, the California signal crayfish were imported to benefit the restaurant trade

Fortunately, for some of us, the only way to reduce the onslaught of the invading new species of crayfish seem to be to trap them and, of course, to eat them. Certainly most of my readers are all for that; In the name of a balanced ecology, of course...

TRAPPY XL IS COMING

The Extra Large (XL) cousin of the Trappy is now coming off the injection mold machines in Sweden and will be here in the spring ready to catch large quantities of these delectable invaders...

CRAYFISH MATERIAL WANTED

To those readers who responded to my request last month for crayfish material ideas, I sincerely thank you. Today's topic is a reflection of one of those emails. For the rest of you, please consider to drop me an email when you have some article ideas.

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