

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

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INTERIOR BUREAU PROPOSES BAN ON "WALKING CATFISH"

A fish with exceptional natural endowments--it can remain dormant in summer, hibernate in winter, and between times walk over land--is crowding native species for food and space in Florida and is about to be banned from importation into the United States.

This unusual creature that is becoming dominant in parts of Florida is the "walking catfish" (Clarias batrachus), a native of Southeast Asia that was first noticed in Florida two years ago.

Now there are fears that this fish, which has accessory breathing organs enabling it to use air, may spread throughout Florida and to other States.

So the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (BSFW), which guards against importation of dangerous species, proposes that as of December 31, 1969, walking catfish and their eggs no longer may be imported or acquired without special permit.

"Walking catfish" arrived in Florida when tropical fish dealers imported young specimens for sale--and some of them escaped.

A Florida fisherman caught one on March 15, 1967, and turned it over to officials at BSFW's nearby Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Then, on May 25, 1968, a specimen nearly a foot long was captured alive at night as it was finning along on bare ground near Boca Raton on Florida's West Coast. Investigators found six more adults in the area in less than a month.

Since that time, about 3,000 walking catfish have been collected in southern Florida. Some of them have been young, indicating that natural spawning is underway here.

Interior's order placing bans on this species, which appeared in the Federal Register on August 19, stressed that "present fish management practices have been ineffective in controlling the spread. . . ."

O. E. Frye, Jr., director of Florida's Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, has called the situation a "real frightening thing." He believes a definite danger exists that walking catfish may become established in other states, but he points out that man will be the primary mover (although the fish sometimes "walks" a quarter mile or more).

In a letter to the Bureau, he noted that publicity has created an unprecedented demand for the species and prices have risen from 39 cents to almost 9 dollars in some areas.

The walking catfish's inability to survive in waters much below 60 degrees will, however, place a limit on the creature's ability to benefit from man's profiteering.

A toxicant called rotenone kills these fish, but often they are able to crawl out of treated water.

"Until better control methods come along," says Commissioner Charles H. Meacham of the Fish and Wildlife Service, "we propose establishing these import and acquisition bans on walking catfish so that desirable ecological balances will not be destroyed."

Interested persons may submit written comments, suggestions or objections with respect to the proposed action, to the Director, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Washington, D.C. 20240, within 90 days of the publication date in the Federal Register.