

Watery Grave

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor
April 2018

A tiny but destructive fish reveals the child in the man



must be a mermaid, Rango. I have no fear of depths and a great fear of shallow living.” -- Anaïs Nin

My most cherished boyhood moments took place peering through the lens of a small yellow mask on the coral reefs off Elliott Key, bowing before the Queen Angels, saluting the Sergeant Majors, egging on the eels, and chuckling with the clownfish.

Here I discovered my happiest happy place. And of all the wondrous creatures that populated my undersea sanctuary, one possessed more majesty than all the rest -- the lionfish.

These exotic beings existed only in the faraway Indian and Pacific Oceans, so I could never actually see them in the flesh and had to settle for rare glimpses through the windows of tropical aquariums. But when I did, their peculiar languid beauty, brownish-maroon and white stripes billowing along fanlike fins, entranced me and exploded my young heart with the wonders of nature.

The fact that poison lived at the tips of their fluttering quills made them even more impossibly magnificent. Lionfish were my childhood unicorns.

When I moved back to Florida a few years ago, I was shocked to learn that lionfish now populated our reefs, thought to have arrived in Florida's waters in the mid-1980s, most likely when some aquarium owners tired of them and released a handful of the fish in the Atlantic. Our buttery warm reefs, teeming with life, were a lionfish paradise. With no natural predators, they began to procreate with reckless abandon. Now lionfish are considered the most destructive

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exotic species in marine waters off Florida and the Caribbean.

According to *National Geographic*, “They have voracious appetites and consume dozens of organisms in one feeding, drastically reducing other fish populations and altering delicate reef ecosystems. In addition, lionfish can lay up to 30,000 eggs every four days, and their venomous spines leave them with no known predators in Florida waters. Ocean currents and hurricanes helped lionfish spread from Florida’s Atlantic coast to the Bahamas, throughout the Caribbean Sea, and into the Gulf of Mexico.”

These unwanted invaders have evolved into not only a disaster for our regions’ beloved undersea ecologies but to our economies as well, because once they gain a stronghold, they’re difficult and expensive to control.

You’ll see lionfish now available at the fish counters of many markets. I even tasted a surprisingly delicious sample of lionfish ceviche at Whole Foods. In fact, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission “encourages divers, anglers, and commercial harvesters to remove lionfish in Florida waters to limit negative impacts to native marine life and ecosystems.”

In other words, anyone finding a lionfish, regal and gorgeous as it may be, should kill it.

One day last year, my kids and I splashed in the Miami Beach surf, frolicking amid large ocher clusters of sargassum seaweed. These floating clumps teemed with life, and we’d shake them to see what emerged. My boys scooped fingernail-size brine shrimp into the cups of their hands and watched them jackknife their tiny bodies to escape back to their seaweed cities.

I managed to scoop a small fish into a plastic cup. No larger than my thumb, it had, I noticed, what appeared to be the beginnings of the stripes, wings, and frills of a lionfish. My kids and I marveled at this adorable, unusual creature. Curious to confirm my hunch, I walked with my little cup-bound captive to the lifeguard stand. “Yup, that’s a lionfish, all right. I’ve never seen one this close to the beach,” said the female guard.

My mind immediately skipped to the next step: *What do I do with this tiny cute little thing?*

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“You have to kill it,” she said through a slight wince.

So there I stand on our sun-dappled beach, my children squealing in the turquoise surf of my sanctuary, as they fall backward into waves. My world stands in perfect harmony, except that, in my hand swims not only the creature I held dearest as a boy, my unicorn, but a baby unicorn that I’ve just been ordered to kill.

I stared into the cup. The helpless lionfish cub slowly swiped its tail back and forth, totally oblivious to the massive Orwellian moment vexing me to the core of my conservationist heart. A few minutes passed. At last, deciding the greater good of our marine ecosystem trumped the life of my little chum, I took a knee, dug a hole and emptied my cup into it. As I covered the makeshift grave with sand, I said, “I’m sorry, my friend. I really am.” The little boy in me could not make sense of this moment, yet the man in me knew it was the right thing to do.

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