



## Scenario B: Invasion of the Snakeheads

### Scientific and Historical Background Information



The Chesapeake Bay watershed is home to thousands of habitats, each with a unique living community. The various species within these communities all interact with one another, with the health of the community depending on a balance of all of the biotic and abiotic factors within the ecosystem at any given time. The loss of any one species through local extinction or the introduction of an exotic species will change the balance and, quite possibly, destroy the original living community. The introduction of the northern snakehead fish (*Channa argus*) into rivers and ponds in various locations in the United States since 1997 has done just that.

The northern snakehead is an aggressive top predator with a large mouth and sharp teeth. These fish compete successfully with native predatory species, such as largemouth bass, eating the young of other fish, frogs and even small birds. Adults can grow up to 33 inches in length and weigh 18 pounds. They prefer slow shallow streams with mud or vegetated bottoms and shallow ponds. Tolerant of water with low dissolved oxygen levels, snakeheads have been known to survive up to four days on land if they are kept wet, and juveniles can wriggle their way from one body of water to another one nearby.<sup>1</sup>

Considered a delicacy in Asian cuisine, officials suspect that the fish has been deliberately introduced into streams and ponds for use in home kitchens and restaurants. “In June 2002, an established population of this species was discovered in a pond in Crofton, **Maryland**. This population was eradicated by state biologists using rotenone. . . Beginning in April 2004, several fish were captured from the Potomac River in **Maryland** and **Virginia**. . . The Potomac River population now extends throughout the lower Potomac from Great Falls to the mouth, including some tidal portions with moderate salinity . . .”<sup>2</sup> In Delaware, “snakeheads have been found in the Nanticoke River and its major tributaries in Sussex County, and one popular New Castle County fishing pond to date.”<sup>3</sup>

Federal and state regulations have made importation, possession or transport of live northern snakeheads illegal. Anglers who land a snakehead are asked to kill it and notify their state’s Department of Natural Resources. Current efforts to control the snakehead include the recipes for invasivores in popular journals and websites and snakehead fishing contests for Maryland anglers.<sup>3</sup>



### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, NAS-Nonindigenous Aquatic Species, URL:  
<http://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/FactSheet.aspx?SpeciesID=2265>.

<sup>2</sup> DNREC News for Immediate Release, Delaware, New signage alerts anglers to look out for invasive snakeheads in Delaware waterways, April 30, 2012.  
Joanna Wilson, Public Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> O'Brien, R. (2011, July 25). Snakehead hooked in Delaware waterways, Cecil Whig. Retrieved 2013.

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