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The western Pacific red lionfish, *Pterois volitans* (Scorpaenidae), in Florida: Evidence for reproduction and parasitism in the first exotic marine fish established in state waters

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ABSTRACT

Many exotic fresh-water and brackish-water fish species have become established in Florida waters, but the red lionfish is the first entirely marine species that appears to have become established here. We give a detailed account of the initial collections of adult specimens from off St. Augustine and Jacksonville, including data on morphometrics, meristics, and gonad histology. Our review of historical sightings on Florida reefs and of the specimens reported herein suggests that the most plausible vector for the introduction of this fish was aquarium releases. We discuss our reasons for concluding that this species has probably become established in Florida, summarize the potential danger that these venomous fishes pose to the public, and examine the effect of a parasite hosted by the male lionfish. We also consider the potential effect of the red lionfish on marine communities in Florida, but limited information on its biology precludes a detailed assessment.

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1. Introduction

Most established populations of exotic marine fishes are either anadromous, e.g., Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) on the USA. West Coast (Volpe et al., 2000), or are limited to enclosed or semienclosed systems such as inland seas and coastal bays and estuaries (Baltz, 1991). There have been very few marine fish established in open marine systems, and our current understanding of the processes that control the success of an introduction in these systems is poor (Baltz, 1991).

In the United States the number of exotic fishes collected in Florida is second only to the number collected in California (U.S.G.S, 2004). At least 123 exotic fish species have been collected in Florida, and about 36 of these are established; most

of the established species are restricted to fresh-water habitats, and at least 4 are established in Florida estuaries (FWRI, unpublished data; U.S.G.S, 2004). Also, a number of exotic tropical reef fishes, predominantly angelfishes (*Pomacanthus* sp.), surgeonfishes (*Zebrasoma* sp.), a serranid (*Chromileptes altivelis*), and lionfishes (*Pterois* sp.), have been reported from various Florida reefs but are not known to be established (FWRI, unpublished data; U.S.G.S, 2004; Semmens et al., 2004). The introductions of exotic fishes into Florida waters have been accidental or purposeful and reflect Florida's consumption and production of tropical ornamental fishes. The trade of these ornamental fishes has been dominated since the 1950s by fresh-water species. But, it is likely that the number of marine species in the market will increase because of

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improvements in “mini-reef system” aquaria (Larkin and Degner, 2001), and in access to a larger number of marine species due to the increase in the number of airline flights to remote areas (Larkin, 2003).

The red lionfish, *Pterois volitans* (Linnaeus, 1758), is predominately an aquarium fish in many parts of the world, although in some areas of its native range it is a food fish (FishBase, 2003). *P. volitans* is among the 10 most valuable marine fish imported to the US (Balboa, 2003), which collectively contributed 28% of the total value of marine fish or about \$3.05 million per month (Balboa, 2003). Miami and Tampa, 2 of the 38 official ports of entry into the United States, accounted for 21% and 2%, respectively, of the 1996–1999 average annual number of tropical fish (fresh-water and marine species combined) shipments (Balboa, 2003). An inspection of the importer’s invoices revealed that 7562 lionfish were imported to Tampa between January 1 and July 1, 2003, by the local aquarium industry (J. DeJulio, pers. comm.).

P. volitans (Linnaeus, 1758) occurs naturally throughout the western Pacific Ocean from southern Japan and southern Korea to the east coast of Australia, Indonesia, Micronesia and French Polynesia and in the South Pacific Ocean from western Australia to the Marquesas and Oeno in the Pitcairn Islands (Schultz, 1986; Myers, 1991). A closely related form, currently recognized as *P. miles* (Schultz, 1986), may be conspecific with *P. volitans* (Kochzius et al., 2003). Outside of its natural range, *P. volitans* was reported from Bermuda and off the eastern United States (Whitfield et al., 2002; Semmens et al., 2004). In addition, there are unverified records in the Caribbean Sea from Mexico, St. Kitts, and Puerto Rico (Hare and Whitfield, 2003).

The historical records of lionfish along the US Atlantic coast suggest that Florida may be at least one of the initial sources of the lionfish introduction. The first documented release of lionfish in the eastern United States took place in Florida on August 24, 1992 (Courtenay, 1995). Six lionfish were freed when Hurricane Andrew destroyed a large marine

aquarium on a waterfront porch at the edge of Biscayne Bay. These lionfish were seen alive nearby several days later. Courtenay (1995) also mentioned a lionfish captured by hook and line from Lake Worth Pier, Palm Beach County, Florida, but no additional information is available for this specimen except that it was mounted (W.R. Courtenay, Jr., pers. comm.). Lionfish sightings were reported from eastern Florida sporadically from 1993 to 2004, but most of these reports were unverified.

In February 2002, Mr. David Brown, a high school marine science teacher from Jacksonville, Florida, sent the first red lionfish (Fig. 1(a)) caught off St. Augustine, Florida by Captain David Hagan, to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI). Mr. John Kelly caught the second specimen on Feb 6, 2002, at the south end of Amelia Island (30.51°N, 81.44°W), Florida. This fish was captured by hook and line with live shrimp in about 1 m of water. The fish was discarded dead. The third red lionfish (Fig. 1(c)) was captured off Jacksonville, Florida, in early March 2002 and sent to FWRI. Elsewhere along the US Atlantic coast, an adult red lionfish was caught off Georgia, and two juveniles were caught off Long Island, New York, both in 2001 (Whitfield et al., 2002). Additionally, single adult lionfish were caught off Georgia and North Carolina, and photographs and videos of lionfish have been obtained from localities off Georgia, North Carolina, New Jersey, and New York (Whitfield et al., 2002; Hare and Whitfield, 2003; A. David, pers. comm.; S.W. Ross, pers. comm.).

In its native range, the red lionfish occurs over coral, sand, and hard-bottom substrates from the surface to 50 m (Schultz, 1986). It occurs along the seaward edge of reefs, in lagoons, in turbid inshore areas, and harbors (Schultz, 1986; Myers, 1991). During the day it is often found under ledges and crevices but may also hunt small fish, shrimps, and crabs in open water at night (Myers, 1991). When hunting, the red lionfish corrals prey animals by spreading its large pectoral fins and then swallows them in a single motion (Allen and

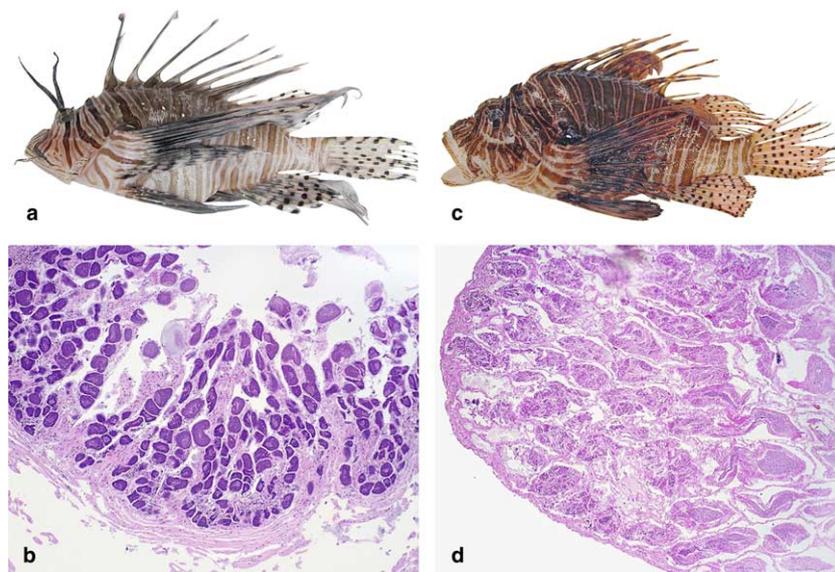


Fig. 1 – *Pterois volitans*: (a) lateral view of FSBC 19395 (133 mm SL, 184 TL); (b) gonad histology (100×) of FSBC 19395; a female in regressed maturation stage or class 1 on January 29; (c) lateral view of FSBC 19403 (276 mm SL, 378 TL); (d) gonad histology (100×) of FSBC 19403; a male in early or mid maturation stage, class 1 or class 2 in early March.

Eschmeyer, 1973). In 2003, red lionfish were observed in waters as deep as 79 m along the coast of North and South Carolina (S.W. Ross, pers. comm.), and one of the authors (PEW) also observed red lionfish on artificial reefs off North and South Carolina.

Lionfish have complex courtship and mating behaviors. Males have an elaborate courting display and will use their spines in agonistic displays with competing males (Fishelson, 1975). The females release two mucus-filled egg clusters that dissolve and release the eggs into the water column (Fishelson, 1975). Larvae of *P. volitans* have been described based on five specimens (3.8–11 mm notochord length or standard length) caught off northwestern Australia (Imamura and Yabe, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is: (1) to document the initial collections of red lionfish in Florida; (2) to present evidence that lionfish are established in Florida; (3) to discuss potential vectors for the introduction of this species into Florida; (4) to discuss the potential effect that established populations of this species may have upon on marine communities in Florida.

2. Methods

Taxonomic identification was based on Schultz (1986) and on the original description (Linnaeus, 1758). Methodology for counts and measurements followed Hubbs and Lagler (1949) and Eschmeyer (1965). Measurements are expressed in mm and/or percentage of standard length (SL). A portion of the gonad of each specimen was fixed in 15% buffered formalin, embedded in plastic, and serially sectioned to 4 μ m. The sections were stained with hematoxylin and eosin for histological examination. Maturation stage was determined according to criteria defined by Taylor et al. (1998) and Grier and Taylor (1998). The lionfish specimens were cataloged in the FWRI Ichthyology Collection under catalog numbers FSBC 19395 and FSBC 19403. Identification of a parasite hosted by one of the specimens was based on Sawyer et al. (1975). The parasite was fixed in 5% buffered formalin, preserved in 70% ethanol, and deposited in the US National Parasite Collection (USNPC), Beltsville, Maryland. The catalogue number is USNPC 088999.

3. Results

3.1. *P. volitans*, FSBC 19395

Collection data: Speared on January 29, 2002, by Captain David Hagan using SCUBA, offshore of St. Augustine, St. Johns

County, Florida (29.9445°N, 80.5059°W), in 38.4 m of water. An additional six red lionfish were observed.

Meristics: Fin-ray counts- dorsal XIII, 13; anal III, 7-8 (last 2 rays united at base); pectorals (left/right) 14/14; pelvics (left/right) I,5/I,5. Scales all cycloid, and 85 or more pored scales in lateral line. Gill rakers along 1st arch: 17-4 upper plus 12 and 1 rudiment lower.

Morphometric measurements (in mm): SL 133, total length (TL) 184, interorbital distance (width) 10.8, spinous dorsal fin base 60.7, pectoral fin lengths (left and right) 87.5 and 87.8, pectoral fin bases 14.1 and 14.2, pelvic fin lengths (left and right) 43.5 and 43.4, pelvic fin bases 6.6 and 6.5, caudal fin length 35.1, caudal peduncle depth 10.8, longest dorsal-fin spine (6th) 41.7, anal fin height 27.1, anal fin length 15.2, upper jaw length 21.2, lower jaw length 20.6, supraorbital tentacle length 30.9, 1st upper jaw tentacle length 0.8, 2nd upper jaw tentacle length 10.8, 3rd upper jaw tentacle length 16.8, and diameter of most proximate spot on the last element of dorsal and anal fins 2.8. Proportional measurements (in % SL): body depth 34.9, head length (HL) 35.1, and predorsal distance 24.8. Snout length 37.3, and orbit diameter 20 of HL.

Weight: 81.5 g.

Color (after 24 h on ice): Head and body crossed by red-brown bars on a pale background. Vertical fins transparent with prominent black dots; 6 white spots along lateral line. White spots also present on upper part of pectoral axil. Pelvic fins black with numerous white spots (Fig. 1(a)).

Sex and maturity: female fish in regressed maturation stage or class 1 (Fig. 1(b)).

3.2. *P. volitans*, FSBC 19403

Collection data: Speared in early March 2002, by Captain David Hagan using SCUBA, offshore of Jacksonville, Duval County, Florida, in about 45 m of water.

Meristics: Fin-ray counts- dorsal XIII, 11; anal III, 7-8 (last 2 united at base); pectorals (left/right) 14/14; pelvics (left/right) I,5/I,5. Scales all cycloid, and 85 or more pored scales in lateral line. Gill rakers along 1st arch: 16-5 upper plus 11 lower. Gill rakers short and worn.

Morphometric measurements (in mm): SL 276, TL 378, interorbital distance (width) 22.4, spinous dorsal-fin base 128.1, pectoral fin lengths (left and right) 157.9 and 158.3, pectoral fin bases 43.9 and 43.5, pelvic fin lengths (left and right) 104.2 and 104.3, pelvic fin bases 25.3 and 24.9, caudal fin length 88.3, caudal peduncle depth 29, longest dorsal fin spine (6th) 90.8, anal fin height 80.2, anal fin length 50.3, upper jaw length 45.8, lower jaw length 29.9, supraorbital tentacle ab-



Fig. 2 – *Myzobdella lugubris* Leidy, 1851 (Hirudinea, Piscicolidae), USNPC 088999, a leech 22 mm long hosted by *P. volitans* FSBC 19403.

sent, 1st upper jaw tentacle length 9.3, 2nd upper jaw tentacle length 6.2, 3rd upper jaw tentacle length 23, most proximate spot on the last element of dorsal and anal fins 4.0.

Proportional measurements (in % SL): body depth 42.8, head length (HL) 35, and predorsal distance 27.2. Snout length 38 and orbit diameter 19.3 of HL.

Weight: 869 g.

Color (after 36 h on ice): Head and body crossed by red-brown bars on a pale background. Vertical fins transparent with prominent black dots; 7 white spots along the lateral line. White spots also present on upper part of pectoral axil. Pelvic fins black with numerous white spots (Fig. 1(c)).

Sex and maturity: Male fish in early or mid maturation stage, class 1 or class 2 (Fig. 1(d)). Parasite: A leech, *Myzobdella lugubris* Leidy, 1851 (Hirudinea, Piscicolidae) was attached to the middle portion of tongue. The leech measured 22 mm in length (Fig. 2).

4. Discussion

The number of exotic fishes established in Florida waters has continuously increased since the 1950s, but the red lionfish is the first exotic marine fish that appears to have become established in this area. Red lionfish were initially sighted in Florida on shallow-water reefs off Palm Beach in October 1992 (Courtenay, 1995). Sporadic reports have continued since that time, and areas of recent sightings include reefs in northeastern, southeastern and southern Florida (FWRI, unpublished data; Semmens et al., 2004). The substantiated records from Florida to New Jersey (FWRI, unpublished records; Whitfield et al., 2002; Semmens et al., 2004; A. David, pers. comm.) suggest that the red lionfish is widely distributed along the shallow continental shelf of the eastern United States. In parts of this area, water temperature may affect the survival of this tropical species, but the winter temperature on the shallow continental shelf off eastern Florida is comparable to that near the southern limit of the red lionfish's distribution in the Southern Hemisphere. Furthermore, the recurring observations at various Florida sites during several years suggest that red lionfish can survive winter temperatures in this region. In addition, red lionfish showed normal behavior at 17.5–17.9 °C and 58–60 m water depth when observed in submersible dives of Georgia (A. David, pers. comm.). Recent thermal tolerance studies found a mean lethal temperature minimum of 10.0 °C and mean temperature at feeding cessation of 16.1 °C (Kimball et al., 2004). The capture of juvenile red lionfish off New York and New Jersey probably indicate that red lionfish are reproducing in Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, and the offspring are being transported north by the Gulf Stream (Whitfield et al., 2002). Juvenile red lionfish should be able to survive the summers in waters off New Jersey and New York, as has been reported for several subtropical and tropical species (Able and Fahay, 1998), but they would need to migrate offshore and south to find temperatures above their lower tolerance limits during winter (Kendall and Walford, 1979; McBride and Able, 1998). In addition to inferences based on the occurrence of juveniles, other circumstantial data also support our contention that *P. volitans* has established reproducing populations along the US Atlantic coast. Off North Carolina and South Carolina,

groups of two to four red lionfish were observed during several submersible dives in 2002 (S.W. Ross, pers. comm.), and this usually solitary fish is generally observed in small groups only during the initial stage of courtship (Fishelson, 1975). However, courtship behavior or spawning was not observed during the submersible dives (S.W. Ross, pers. comm.).

The female red lionfish (FSCB 19395), captured off St. Augustine, most likely spawned in local waters because its ovary was in the regressed maturation stage or class 1 when collected on January 29. The ovary showed typical primary growth oocytes. These were basophilic and no cortical alveoli or lipid was accumulated in the peripheral cytoplasm (Fig. 1(b)). The male red lionfish (FSBS 19403) had a testis that was either in the early or mid maturation stage, class 1 or class 2 (Fig. 1(d)). This fish was caught off Jacksonville in early March, and had a continuous germinal epithelium at the testis periphery. However, due to post mortem changes, it could not be determined if the proximal germinal epithelium, near the testis ducts, was continuous or discontinuous—the criterion used to separate early maturation and mid maturation classes. Based on our examination of the ovarian and testicular histology, we suspect that red lionfish commences reproductive activity in Florida during the early part of the year.

Since the annual reproductive cycle of pteroin fishes has not been studied, we used histological criteria based on perciform fishes (i.e., Taylor et al., 1998; Grier and Taylor, 1998). These criteria appear to be universal in fishes and have been used to establish the annual reproductive cycle of different fishes (Brown-Peterson et al., 2002a,b; Lo Nostro et al., 2003). Although these criteria have not been used for pteroin fishes, our histology leaves little doubt about their future application when continuous collections of *P. volitans* might become available.

The presence of the parasite *Myzobdella lugubris* on the male red lionfish collected off Jacksonville (FSBC 19403) is the first record of this piscicolid leech in a marine fish. Previously reported hosts include about 24 estuarine and freshwater fishes, the blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*), and grass shrimp (*Palaemonetes pugio*) (Daniels and Sawyer, 1975; Sawyer et al., 1975; Schramm et al., 1981; Font and Tate, 1994). The life cycle of *M. lugubris* normally involves two hosts, one fish and one crustacean. In South Carolina, this leech parasitizes a piscine host for most of the year but leaves the fish during the summer to deposit a cocoon on a decapod host (Daniels and Sawyer, 1975). *Myzobdella lugubris* appears to have little host preference (Daniels and Sawyer, 1975; Schramm et al., 1981) and a broad geographic distribution; it has been found in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts (Schramm et al., 1981). In Hawaii, *M. lugubris* was the second most abundant parasite on two exotic species, the swordtail (*Xiphophorus helleri*) and the guppy (*Poecilia reticulata*) (Font and Tate, 1994; Font, 1997). *Myzobdella lugubris* was associated with severe ulceration of the tongue and oral cavity in largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), and lesions were heavily infected with different bacteria (Noga et al., 1990). The host red lionfish (FSBC 19403) had a single lesion on the tongue where the leech was attached but no additional ulceration or lesions were found in the oral cavity. There are no reports in the literature of fish deaths

associated with *M. lugubris*, and the potential effects of this parasite on populations of red lionfish are unknown.

The vector(s) for the introduction of red lionfish into Florida waters is unknown, but there are several possibilities. The natural dispersal of red lionfish larvae or adults from the western Pacific Ocean to Florida is improbable, and we are unaware of intentional releases for fishery development. Accidental introduction of eggs or larvae of this species via ballast water is possible, but there are no reports of successful introductions of scorpaenids among the 35 fish species introduced via ballast water worldwide (Wonham et al., 2000). Therefore, accidental or intentional release of aquarium specimens seems to be the most likely vector for the introduction of red lionfish into Florida. Several lines of evidence support this conclusion: (1) an accidental release was documented in southern Florida (Courtenay, 1995); (2) a considerable number of red lionfish and allied species have been imported to Florida in the past 40 years, i.e., about 80,000 into Tampa and Miami in the first half of 2003, estimated from the number imported to Tampa (J. DeJulio, pers. comm.); (3) the red lionfish collected off Florida have meristic counts typical of specimens from the northern portion of their native range, and about 85% of the marine aquarium fishes imported to the United States come from that area (Baquero, 1999).

The red lionfish could pose a threat to Florida's fishermen, divers, and wildlife inspectors because it is venomous and because the general public may not be aware of that fact. This species can inject venom via 13 dorsal-fin spines, 3 anal-fin spines, and 2 pelvic-fin spines (one in each fin); the glandular complex that produces the venom is located within the anterolateral grooves of the spines and covered by integumentary sheets (Tange, 1953; Halstead et al., 1955). It is well established that red lionfish will stand their ground when harassed (Myers, 1991) and, when threatened, will arch their backs, pointing their dorsal spines at the aggressor, and swim forward rapidly in order to inflict a sting (Steinitz, 1959; Atz, 1962). Envenomation of the hand has been the most common injury (Kizer et al., 1985; Patel and Wells, 1993). It should also be stressed that serious wounds have also resulted from the careless handling of recently dead specimens (Pulce et al., 1991). The sting of the red lionfish causes little or no pain initially but leads to several hours of extreme pain, depending upon the amount of venom received (Halstead and Courville, 1970). Other symptoms of the sting may include swelling, redness, bleeding, nausea, numbness, joint pain, anxiety, headache, disorientation, dizziness, nausea, paralysis, and convulsions (Ray and Coates, 1958; Steinitz, 1959; Halstead and Courville, 1970; Trestrail and Al-Mahasneh, 1989). Patel and Wells (1993) emphasized that any further contact with the fish should be avoided to prevent a hypersensitivity reaction. Kasdan et al. (1987) noted that the lack of immediate care might lead to complications and eventual loss of motion in the affected area. Several authors have indicated that red lionfish venom is not lethal to humans (Kizer et al., 1985; Trestrail and Al-Mahasneh, 1989; Patel and Wells, 1993), but others have indicated that it can be lethal (Russell, 1965; Allen and Eschmeyer, 1973; Myers, 1991).

The introduction of marine fishes is relatively rare, so the effects of such introductions are not well documented. The

ecological impact of exotic species in other habitats has been discussed at length by various authors (Taylor et al., 1984; Nichols et al., 1990; Carlton and Geller, 1993; Simberloff et al., 1997; Carlton, 2001; Kolar and Lodge, 2002), and potential effects could include habitat alteration, degradation of water quality, introduction of diseases and parasites, competition, predation, hybridization, or replacement of native species. More than 536 species have been introduced to the United States, but fewer than 30 are marine species introduced to marine environments (Fuller et al., 1999). Most marine fish introductions have been the result of intentional releases for fishery development or of aquarium releases (Randall, 1987). The introduction of marine fishes has not been considered to be an important threat (Ruiz et al., 1997), but Randall (1987) pointed out that none of the seven fishes introduced to Hawaiian waters had reached its expected potential, and that the introduction of seven species had been criticized for one reason or another. During the 1950s there were several intentional introductions of snappers and groupers into Hawaiian waters, which led to the establishment of *Lutjanus kasmira*, *Lutjanus fulvus*, and *Cephalopholis argus* in nearshore waters (Randall, 1960, 1987; Baltz, 1991). By far the most successful of these was *L. kasmira*. Age and growth studies have shown that *L. kasmira* has a rapid growth rate, especially when compared with other Hawaiian deep-water snappers, and the faster growth rate was attributed, in part, to a lack of competitors (Morales-Nin and Ralston, 1990). In addition, stomach-content analysis confirmed that this introduced snapper had adversely affected many populations of native species (Oda and Parrish, 1981). A recent study clearly verified that effect by showing that *L. kasmira* is now the second most abundant fish both in numbers and biomass over hard substrate in Hawaii (Friedlander et al., 2002). This Hawaiian example and the well-documented deleterious effects of exotic plant and animal species in various ecosystems (Carlton, 2001) suggest the potential for harmful effects of established marine fishes on Florida ecosystems.

We do not have all the biological data necessary to manage introduced populations of red lionfish. Red lionfish have a wide trophic spectrum (Fishelson, 1975; Sano et al., 1984), and potential prey items are abundant on south Florida reefs. The impact of red lionfish on populations of potential prey and competitors cannot be assessed without detailed data on food habits. Also, we can only speculate on the potential predators of red lionfish in Florida waters, although they are cannibalistic and are eaten by cornet fish (*Fistularia commersoni*) within their native range (Allen and Eschmeyer, 1973; Bernadsky and Goulet, 1991). The small number of red lionfish reported from Florida to date suggests that their ecological impact may currently be minimal, but if there is an increase in their population, they could significantly affect Florida marine communities.

The red lionfish offers new challenges to managers and researchers because of the paucity of biological data on this species. We need to educate the public regarding the potential danger from handling this fish and the potential harm to Florida ecosystems that can be caused by introductions of exotic species. We also need to obtain baseline biological and ecological data in order to assess the potential effects of this species and devise a management strategy. Critical data needs

include prey, predators, competitors, temperature tolerance, spatial distribution, population structure, population genetics, and reproductive biology.

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