

## Lionfish Invasion

### **The Pacific lionfish is stinging the Atlantic.**

*By David Alderton*

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One of the invading lionfish photographed in the Bahamas. Photo by mhedstrom. Hurricane Andrew was the second most powerful storm to blast the U.S. mainland during the last century. But few Florida residents who experienced this dramatic event late in August 1992 would have anticipated that the legacy of its destructive strength would still be growing in the Caribbean waters.

When waves caused by Hurricane Andrew wrecked a waterfront aquarium, six Pacific red lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) were washed away. Once the storm subsided, the surviving fish found life to their liking in the Atlantic Ocean – before starting to breed in the waters of Biscayne Bay.

These lionfish have now become a cause of concern to some zoologists monitoring the reefs. Lad Akins, director of special projects for the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (Reef) believes this species has the potential to cause “a severe impact across our entire marine ecosystem.”

Although no one can be absolutely sure of the origins of all of the growing lionfish population in the Atlantic, DNA investigations suggest that the entire population is descended from just three separate females.

Part of the problem on these reefs is that these lionfish will eat almost anything. Atlantic fish have never encountered anything like them before. Smaller fish don't recognize the lionfish as a potential danger until it is too late, while possible predators are scared off. This may be the result of the lionfish's venomous spines, aside from its disguised appearance.

Divers are reporting regular sightings of Pacific lionfish in Atlantic waters, where their population has risen almost tenfold between 2004 and 2008. Their range is extending, and they have now reached the Bahamas and even Bermuda, as well as the coast of North Carolina.

A particular difficulty in curbing their numbers is their huge reproductive potential. In Florida's warm waters, an individual female may release thousands of eggs every week throughout the year. The young lionfish themselves are mature within a year. Desperate to curb this growing menace, both zoologists and fishermen are now touting Pacific lionfish as a gourmet dish, until such time as a wild predator develops an appetite for them.