The Habitattitude program helps guide people on the proper disposal of unwanted aquatic plants and animals.

Got Undesirable Aquatic Pets?

Story By Patrice M. Charlebois and Kristin TePas
Photos By Patrice M. Charlebois, ISSG/INHS

It's an early summer morning in Carbondale, and a water gardener is tending her pond. Deciding that there is an overabundance of water hyacinth, she nets the excess plants and then wonders where to take them.

In Moline, it is moving day and a couple are downsizing from a large house to a condominium. There's no room for their fish tank in their new home. What to do?

These well-intentioned hobbyists may decide it's best to release their aquatic pets and plants into a nearby pond, lake or stream. This decision, however, could harm the environment as well as the released pets and plants. (Because of this potential harm, it is illegal to release organisms into natural waterways in Illinois.)

Good Deed Gone Bad

Aquarium hobbyists and water gardeners often release their aquatic animals and plants into the natural environment out of kindness to these organisms—a release that is not always humane. Organisms discharged into the environment often die from starvation, are eaten by predators or succumb to parasites and diseases. Although hobbyists seldom intend this fate for their former pets and plants, such fate frequently occurs.

Some aquarium and water garden organisms do thrive when released, however, and can cause significant environmental and economic harm (see Sidebar). Those species most likely to cause harm are called "invasive." When

Responsible pond and aquarium owners and water gardeners are urged to think twice before dumping aquatic pets and plants into native water bodies.

Alternatives to Release

Do you have unwanted pets or plants? Use these options:

- Contact retailers for proper handling advice or possible returns.
- Give to or trade with another responsible aquarist, pond owner or water gardener.
- Donate to a local aquarium society, school or aquatic business.
- Seal aquatic plants in plastic bags and dispose in trash.
- Contact veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance on humane disposal of animals.
- Know your state regulations regarding these alternatives.

introduced into a new environment, invasive species prosper at the expense of the native ones. Invasives compete with natives for space and food or nutrients, may prey upon them, infest them with parasites and diseases, and possibly change their genetic pools through hybridization. The ultimate result is that numbers of native species decline and the pond, lake or stream changes, usually in an irreversible way.

In many cases, invasive animals and plants are non-native or "exotic." Species native to North America, however, may also become invasive when transported to another region of the continent. Regardless of origin, invasive aquatic organisms can be unintentionally spread by aquarium hobbyists, water gardeners and anglers.

Habitattitude

Habitattitude is a national public education campaign to raise awareness of the problems associated with releasing aquatic organisms into the natural environment, and to encourage responsible hobbyist behavior, particularly the use of release alternatives (see Sidebar). This campaign is a cooperative effort of Sea Grant, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Look for the Habitattitude fishbowl logo and accompanying prevention message—"protect our environment, do not release fish and aquatic plants"—to start appearing at your local pet stores soon.

In Illinois it is illegal to release an organism into a natural waterway unless it came from that waterway without first securing a permit from DNR. This law helps protect our waters from the harm that can be caused by released pets and plants.

Aquaria provide hours of enjoyment, but when the enjoyment fades, or the critters outgrow the container, owners are faced with a disposal dilemma.

What Can You Do?

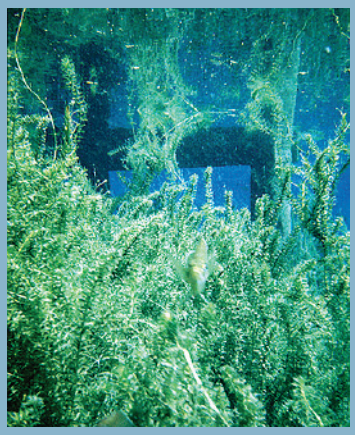
First and foremost, you can tend aquaria and water gardens responsibly by choosing alternatives to release. You also can learn more about the invasive species issue and share your knowledge with fellow hobbyists. Finally, you can encourage your aquarium or water gardening clubs, pet retailers, nurseries and local governing agencies to help promote the "don't release" message. By taking these steps, you play a vital role in helping protect our natural resources from aquatic invasive species.

Be a responsible hobbyist. Get Habitattitude.

To learn more about Habitattitude, visit www.habitattitude.net. For more information on invasive species contact Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant at (847) 872-8677 or visit www.sgnis.org.

Patrice M. Charlebois and Kristin TePas are with the Illinois Natural History Survey's Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant College Program and based in the Zion office.

Hydrilla: handle with care



Hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*), also known as water thyme, is a well-known aquarium and water garden plant native to parts of Asia and Africa. It was first found growing wild in North America (in Florida) in 1960, and has since spread as far north as Connecticut and as far west as California. There's concern that it will soon arrive in Illinois. Hydrilla is a successful invader because it tolerates a wide range of chemical environments, persists in low sunlight and reproduces in various ways. As hydrilla grows, it branches frequently, forming dense mats that create inhospitable habitat for other plants and animals, clog water intake pipes and hinder activities such as boating and swimming. Methods to control hydrilla are costly. Florida alone spends millions annually in hydrilla management.