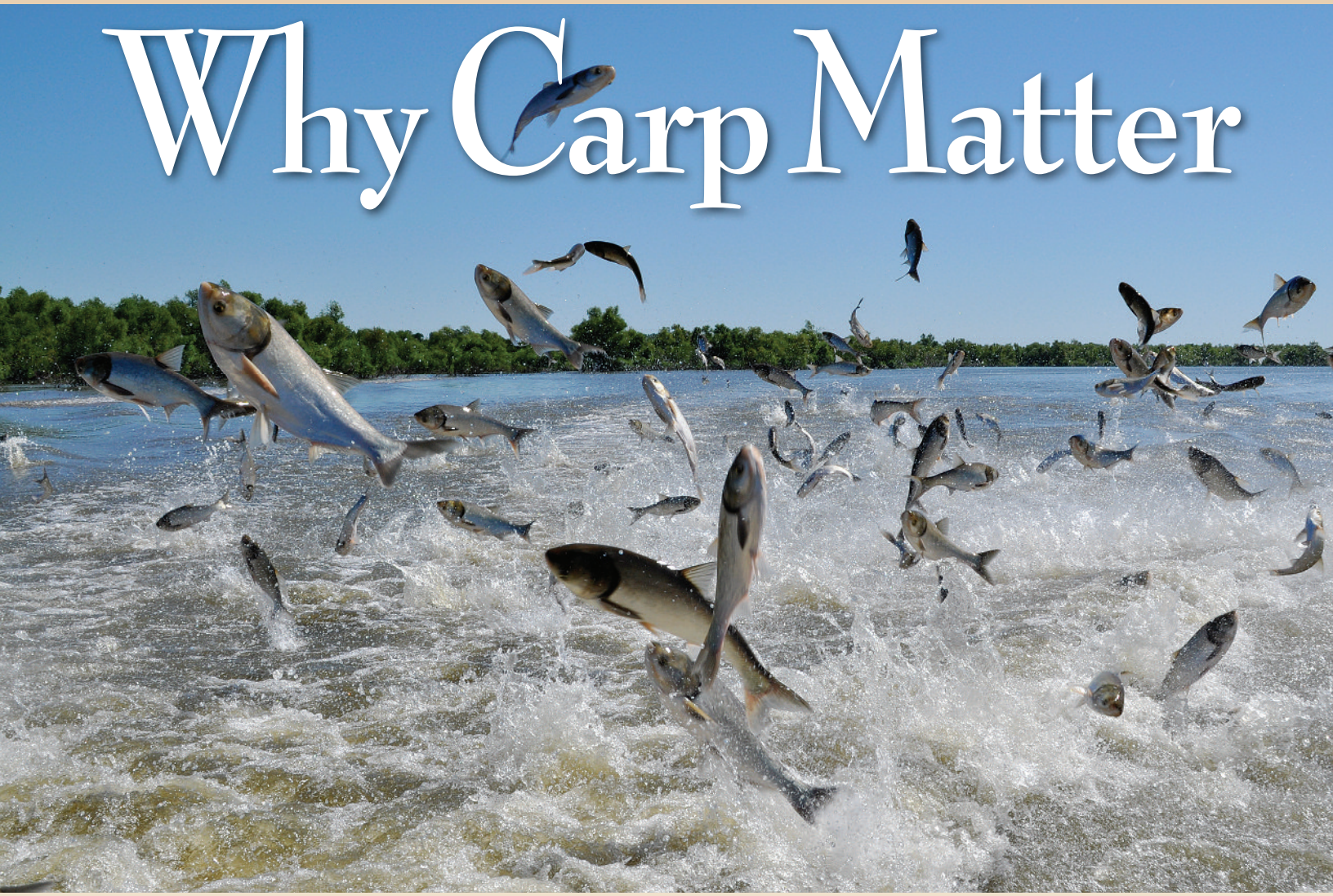
The Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee is maximizing efforts to keep Asian carp out of the Great Lakes.

# Why Carp Matter



Story By Kevin Irons

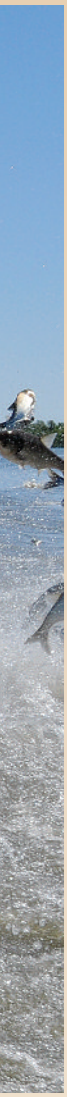
Asian carp, also known as bighead and silver carp, have developed reproducing populations in Illinois in recent years. These giant fish, weighing up to 90 pounds and capable of leaping more than 8 feet into the air, have multiplied within Illinois waters to create some of the densest populations found anywhere in the world. These expanding populations represent a threat to the Great Lakes.

Efforts in Illinois to monitor and reduce carp populations on the Illinois River span from Chicago to the Mississippi River confluence, and have in recent years been supported with funding through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, an initiative of President Obama's administration to restore the ecological health of the Great Lakes. The Department of Natural Resources and cooperating agencies are working diligently to prevent the introduction of Asian carp into the Great Lakes. Different strategies are under way in three general geographical areas. These areas are along a gradient from south, where some of the highest Asian carp densi-

**A host of partnering agencies are working to prevent Asian carp from accessing the Great Lakes.**

(Photo courtesy Kevin Irons.)

**Asian carp monitoring and population-reduction efforts take place along the length of the Illinois River. Management strategies within each of three geographic areas are driven by the density of carp present.**



(Photo courtesy Thad Cook.)

ties exist in the world, to north, where these fish are rare.

The strategy downstream of Starved Rock Lock and Dam (near Ottawa), where high densities of Asian carp exist, is to remove fish through commercial harvest. Plans are under way to increase this effort. Downstream populations are the only reproducing populations within the Illinois River, thus removal there provides the highest success for diminishing overall numbers of fish. Also, harvest will reduce the numbers of carp which could migrate upstream and ultimately threaten the Great Lakes. The millions of pounds of fish harvested from the Illinois River by commercial anglers are being used for human consumption, fertilizers and other fish products. Efforts to increase harvest will expand upon existing markets and increase volume availability.

The second focus of management is the area directly downstream of the barrier (underwater electric cables that generate an electric field from the bottom of the canal to the top of the water column, creating a barricade that makes fish increasingly uncomfortable upon their approach) at Romeoville, from Joliet downstream to Ottawa. Asian carp there exist in rather low levels from Ottawa to Morris, migrating in from downstream reaches, and become exceedingly rarer as you approach the barrier near Joliet. The majority of these Asian carp are approximately 31 miles downstream of the barrier. This management area traditionally has not been open to commercial fishing; however, commercial anglers now contracted with DNR are harvesting carp, and DNR biologists are collecting data regarding the numbers, locations and other statistics where fish are removed.

From June through September 2010, this contracted effort set more than 1,400 nets totaling 82 miles within the Marseilles (Marseilles to Channahon) and Dresden (Channahon to Joliet) pools of the Illinois waterway with more than 60 tons of Asian carp removed. Noticeable reductions in overall catches while netting occurred over time. Efforts in 2011 will be more

**University students received first-hand knowledge of the Illinois River Asian carp issue.**

(Photo courtesy Thad Cook.)

(Photo courtesy Kevin Irons.)

**Asian carp jump in response to biologists electroshocking a stretch of the Illinois River south of the Starved Rock dam.**

extensive, beginning in April and running through November.

The third focus area is the Chicago Area Waterway System. An extensive canal system in the Chicago area that connects the Illinois River and waterway to the Great Lakes system, this artificial connection was created more than 100 years ago with the primary objective of diverting sewage from Chicago drinking-water supply intakes. A victory of the Clean Water Act of 1972 and other environmental laws, the canal has vastly improved in terms of aquatic life and water quality.

Within the CAWS, DNR, along with state and federal partners, is monitoring fish populations, specifically looking for Asian carp. Monitoring includes electrofishing and netting at fixed sites throughout the 70-plus miles of canals, as well as electrofishing entire reaches of the canals in Illinois.

Working to prevent Asian carp from accessing the Great Lakes has been the mission of member organizations of the Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee (see sidebar). Their 2011 Asian Carp Control Strategy Framework was assembled from multiple agencies concerned with this issue, under the overall direction of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. The framework addresses efforts throughout the Great Lakes basin, including more than 43 projects designed to detect, remove and prevent the spread of Asian carp. Working directly with the CEQ, Asian carp Director John Goss and his staff, DNR is coordinating efforts with other agencies to maximize the best possible actions to keep Asian carp from the Great Lakes.

To keep up to date on efforts of the ACRCC and other Asian carp topics, visit www.AsianCarp.org.

Kevin Irons is the DNR Aquaculture and Aquatic Nuisance Species Program manager. He is based in Springfield and can be reached at kevin.irons@illinois.gov or (217) 557-0719. For additional information on Asian carp, see Rising Concern, *Outdoor*Illinois March 2007.

## Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
U.S. Coast Guard
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Geological Survey
U.S. Dept. of Transportation/Maritime Administration National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
White House Council on Environmental Quality
Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources
Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment
Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources
New York Dept. of Environmental Resources
Ohio Dept. of Natural Resources
Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Protection
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources

## Other Participating Agencies and Organizations

Great Lakes Fishery Commission
City of Chicago
Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Great Chicago

(Photo courtesy Kevin Irons.)

**Exotic Asian carp species present in Illinois waters include (top to bottom) silver, grass and bighead carp.**