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Science & Technology

Conservation and cookery
Eat for the ecosystem

Oct 15th 2009
From *The Economist* print edition

A heartening tale of business and the environment



Science Photo Library

RED lionfish are pretty, but they are also greedy. A single one of them, introduced into a coral reef where the species is not native, can reduce the number of other small fish by 80% in just a few weeks, according to Mark Hixon, a marine biologist at Oregon State University. To make matters worse, lion fish are top predators. Though their size would make them an easy mouthful for a shark or a grouper, their poisonous spines mean they are more or less invulnerable.

In the lionfish's native waters, the western Pacific Ocean, the local ecosystem has adjusted to such predatory behaviour. In the Caribbean, though, the lionfish is a novelty—and a destructive one. Anything that damages the biodiversity of the reefs in diving resorts is bad for tourism, so in some countries, such as Mexico and Belize, people have tried introducing bounties payable to divers who catch lionfish. Sadly, there are too many lionfish about, and the bounties have proved too expensive to sustain. But there may be an answer: prove that the lionfish is not in fact a top predator after all, by getting people to eat it.

That is the method proposed by Sean Dimin, one of the owners of a firm called Sea to Table. Mr Dimin's company works with fishermen who practise sustainable fisheries management, and helps them get their catches into the sort of high-class restaurants frequented by wealthy conservationists. Mr Dimin got his idea from the appearance in some resorts of "lionfish rodeos", in which holidaymaking divers round the fish up, and which are usually followed by lionfish cook-ups on the beach. He learned from these that the fish, suitably de-spined, are delicious (they taste like snapper). That got him wondering if consumer demand might be a force powerful enough to halt even an invasive species as successful as the lionfish.

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To test the market, Mr Dimin contacted a few chefs at snazzy restaurants in Chicago and New York to see if they had any interest in serving lionfish to their customers. All jumped at the chance. Sea to Table therefore bought a supply of the beasts and sent them on to the restaurants in question. The fish were sold out within two nights.

Customers did, indeed, like the taste. But according to Bruce Sherman, chef and owner of North Pond Restaurant in Chicago, which took some of Mr Dimin's initial batch, the story of the fish and the fact that eating it supports a conservation effort added to the appeal of the dish.

On the back of this success, Sea to Table is trying to develop an organised industry to fish for the species. That should not be too hard. Although traditional fishing methods using nets or lines do not work with these animals, there are, as Mr Dimin observes, a lot of people who are more than happy to get paid to go diving in the Caribbean—especially as they get to feel good about it, too.

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