

Challenge • Nonnative Species

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Read the paragraphs below and answer the questions that follow.

Sometimes organisms get into an ecosystem in which they do not naturally occur. These organisms are called *nonnative species*. There are more than 30,000 nonnative species in the United States. Many nonnative species pose a threat to the health of an ecosystem. They eat native species or compete with them for habitat and food. They lack their natural predators, so their population can grow at an alarming rate.

One example of a nonnative species is the snakehead fish. This fish is a predator that is native to Asia but was imported to the United States for human consumption and aquarium use only. The state of Maryland had a difficult time dealing with a large population of snakehead fish that entered their waters. These fish destroyed the populations of other fish.

According to Maryland authorities, the northern snakehead invasion began in 2000 when a man purchased two live snakeheads to make soup for his sister. The soup was never made, and the man dumped the fish in the lake. Maryland officials struggled to contain the snakehead fish for about two years. They wanted to prevent them from moving into a nearby river, where they could travel to other habitats. Finally, in 2002, Maryland officials got rid of the snakehead for good by poisoning the ponds they lived in.

1. Why do nonnative species pose a threat to ecosystems?

2. Why was the northern snakehead fish such a danger to the habitat it has invaded in Maryland?

3. Do you think killing all of the snakehead fish was a good idea? Explain your answer.

4. Not all nonnative species are harmful. About 98 percent of the U.S. food supply comes from introduced species such as wheat, rice, cattle, and poultry. Why do you think this is helpful?
