



The aquarium industry is a very popular hobby in the United States. More than 13 million households maintain aquariums, and businesses such as medical offices and restaurants can account for thousands more. However, when owners decide they no longer want, or can no longer take care of the animals and plants in their aquariums, species are often released into the natural environment where they can establish and become invasive. It is important that aquarium owners understand the impacts that AIS can have and take actions to ensure these plants and animals are disposed of in a proper manner and are never released into the natural environment.

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are non-native plants, animals, or pathogens that cause harm to the environment, the economy, and human or animal health. Preventing the spread of AIS is important because once introduced, these species disrupt ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and cost communities huge amounts of time, money, resources, and lost revenue.

Many of the brightly colored and attractive fish, crustaceans, plants, and other creatures purchased for aquariums are exotic and not native to Pennsylvania. If released, they have the potential to become harmful invasive species. These releases can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional introductions can occur if species escape and make their way into a water source. Intentional releases can occur if pet owners decide they can no longer care for their pets or plants, and think the most humane option is to release them into a local pond or river. Unfortunately, the intended good deed of releasing that species could have



dire consequences for native species. Released species can often outcompete native species by altering the food chain and consuming valuable resources needed by native species. AIS also have negative impacts on water quality and have the ability to completely change the dynamics of natural ecosystems.



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Many aquarium species, such as goldfish, red-eared sliders, and numerous aquarium plants like Hydrilla and Brazilian waterweed have already made their way into Pennsylvania waters. National campaigns such as *Habitattitude*™ provide alternatives for releasing unwanted aquarium pets and plants. By following these simple steps, aquarium owners can help prevent further release of these species and play an active role in preventing the spread of AIS.



Photo courtesy of Jon Sullivan, Biolib.cv via Encyclopedia of Life.

Alternatives to Release:

- 1 Contact a retailer for proper handling advice or for possible returns.
- 2 Give/trade with another aquarist, pond owner, or water gardener, or donate to a local aquarium society, school, or aquatic business. If your plant or animal finds a new home with one of these locations, be sure to emphasize “Don’t Release” into the environment.
- 3 Seal aquatic plants in plastic bags and dispose in trash. These materials should not be composted because their seeds and other plant parts may spread.
- 4 Contact a veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance about humane disposal of animals. Disposal of live organisms should be considered as the last resort.

Photo courtesy of Pennsylvania Sea Grant.



References:

Alternatives to Releasing Unwanted Aquarium Pets:
Habitattitude™

Where to report new invasive species infestations:
Sea Grant online reporting form

Pennsylvania Sea Grant AIS fact sheets:

Aquatic invasive species mapping in Pennsylvania:
iMap Invasives

Additional AIS information:
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
Wildlife Forever

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Pennsylvania Sea Grant is a partnership of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Pennsylvania State University, 2023.