



Many teachers bring animals into their classrooms as a way to teach students about responsibility, pet care, animal science, and more. However, most teachers and students are unaware of the impacts of disposing unwanted live animals, plants, and microorganisms into local waters, letting them go down drains, or flushing them down the toilet when they are no longer wanted. These species have the potential to become established in their new environments, and while the intention is to be humane, these introductions can cause extreme harm to native plants, animals, and ecosystems.

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 their spread is important because once introduced, these species disrupt ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and cost communities time, money, resources, and lost revenue.

Intentional release is illegal in most states. Aquarium fish can compete with native fish. Invasive plants can clog waterways and impair boating, swimming, and other recreational activities. Some organisms can spread diseases and parasites by improper disposal of contaminated water and packing materials. Releases can also have economic impacts such as loss of income due to declines in tourism and fishing, damage to infrastructure from fouling organisms, costs to clean up shorelines, and the devaluation of waterfronts. Preventing releases is important to protect lakes, rivers, wetlands, estuaries, and oceans from the harmful impacts of AIS.



Caption here. Credit iStock by Getty Images.

It is important to be mindful of the past, present, and future responsibilities a pet in the classroom will bring. Whenever possible, observe animals in the wild. Many wetlands contain a diverse group of animals and plants. However, if a pet is necessary in the classroom, teachers and students can take a few simple steps to help prevent the release of potentially invasive species and play an active role in preventing their spread. Ensure that plants and animals in the classroom are legal under all state and federal regulations. Animals maintained in captivity should never be released back into the wild. Not only can they harbor pests or pathogens that can spread to wild populations, but they themselves can potentially establish in the ecosystem, and become invasive. If a classroom pet is no longer wanted, consider the following options instead of releasing into the wild.

Alternatives to Release

- Contact a retailer for proper handling advice or for possible returns.
- 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 animals finds a new homes with one of these locations, be sure to emphasize “Don’t Release” into the environment.
- 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.
- Contact a veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance about humane disposal of animals. Disposal of live organisms should be considered as the last resort.



Fish tank. Credit iStock by Getty Images.



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References and Links to More Information:

Alternatives to Releasing Unwanted Aquarium Pets:
Habitattitude™: www.habitattitude.net

Where to report new aquatic invasive species infestations:
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission online reporting form:
<https://www.fishandboat.com/Conservation/AIS/Pages/default.aspx>

Aquatic invasive species in Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Sea Grant AIS fact sheets: <https://seagrant.psu.edu/aquatic-invasive-species-fact-sheets/>

Aquatic Invasive Species Mapping in Pennsylvania:
iMap Invasives: www.imapinvasives.org/

Additional AIS information:
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commissions: www.fishandboat.com
Wildlife Forever: www.wildlifeforever.org/

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