

Are Fish the Newest Public Enemy?

America's public beaches have probably never been cleaner that is if you can forget BP's recent monumental oil spill. But time was when U.S. beaches looked a lot like parts of the Mediterranean strewn with layers of unbelievably inappropriate stuff. For years Texas beaches hosted masses of everything from chunks of Styrofoam and old oil cans sealed from inspection, bottles without messages, sheets of roofing paper, occasionally even entire roofs- in fact almost anything that had no business being on a beach were for years littering our precious Texas sands. But gradually that changed-today the beaches hardly hold a shell or a crab claw let alone any threatening foreign object. They are raked regularly by dedicated city employees who seem to take what they do as seriously as if they were protecting the white walls of the San Jacinto monument from mildew. But as the beaches themselves no longer threaten bare feet and kids burrowing under castle walls of sand, there are now other menaces threatening our places of supposed tranquility. On a recent TV show (I've got to stop channel surfing)-I ran across a horrific presentation of evils threatening to shatter our idyllic vacation lands. They are disguised as fish. Actually they are fish. Fish gone wrong. Now we probably thought that fish were okay, firmly committed to their realms far under the salty sea and except for a few ugly minded sharks and octopi, have continued to keep a decent distance from the bare legs and feet of the happy vacationers. But fish--while we've been sleeping and not paying attention-apparently have been getting bigger and more menacing. Some species of catfish, as demonstrated on this TV show, have gotten bigger than Shetland ponies. The most ambitious of the species-which we in East Texas know only as an entrée accompanying French fries- are now weighing in at over a hundred pounds per fish--so big that fishermen scramble enthusiastically for the biggest of the bunch-the flathead catfish of the Sewanee River-each one so big it won't fit in an ordinary fishing boat and has to be dragged along on a cable to get to the place where they weigh them and take pictures. A hundred pound catfish has to be dangerous; at least it looks dangerous and the people fishing for them act as if they're dangerous. (Remember when it was the fish that was in danger?) Though the flatheads aren't currently menacing our ocean beaches, this is no time to relax. Other things far smaller and more menacing are among us. The show focused on little evils like the box jelly fish, something that floats on the water and is shaped like a box. It looks like an innocent bathtub toy but by reproducing at unbelievable rates it now threatens innocent salt water bathers. Maybe they haven't gotten this far south but the way they've spread like a noxious virus, it may not be long till we find them in our bath tubs. Bump up against one of these innocent looking objects and you'll be on your way to the emergency room. Then there are the flying Asian Carp-the fish that have learned to soar through space, land with a thump on boat decks and up against human bodies. No matter that they self destruct when leaping into a power boat -their intention cannot be mistaken. They are after us-on land, on sea and in the air. Fish are on the way to world leadership. There are also the menacing manta rays huge and powerful, kings of the deep. There are rogue Marlins -attack experts extraordinaire-so big you sense there is room inside them for Jonah and all his dependents. And they can leap and soar through the air like a missile gone amuck.. There are electric fish giving off enough high voltage to make you think you've stuck your finger into the city's main light socket, leaving thousands without power. The beaches are clean but the seas, the lakes, the rivers seem to be becoming more dangerous. And meanwhile the good fish we all love--trout, red snapper , flounder. halibut and swordfish are on the way to endangered species land. What's happening to our play grounds where we still believe we can be innocent as little children dashing through the surf without a

care. The box jellies are watching. The 100 pound flatheads are contemplating. The eels and marlins are getting it together. We're worried about the Iranians and the North Koreans when, as this TV documentary pointed out, it's the oceans we should be watching. Hurrah for home sweet home. The hot tub and the swimming pool are looking better all the time.