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UNH Hosts International Team of Scientists to Search for Bioinvaders

What has ten legs, hairy claws, and may soon be your neighbor? The answer is the Chinese mitten crab; however, an international team of scientists will soon be scouring the Seacoast to find this and other unwanted invasive species before they become well-established in New Hampshire.

From July 24 – 31, 20 researchers from across the globe will be looking around marinas, piers and shipyards in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire in search of invasive marine species. The team will collect hundreds of plants and animals and transport them to laboratories at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) where specific species will be identified. Called the Northeast Rapid Assessment Survey (RAS), it is a “snapshot” of the local marine ecology and may provide early detection of an invasive species. It is hosted every three years by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project at UNH.

Crabs are not the only creatures threatening the Seacoast. The team will be on the look out for other known bioinvaders, such as the “Down Under” Barnacle, the kelp-like Red Algae, and a sea squirt from Japan commonly called the Club Tunicate. These and native marine species will all be cataloged to better understand life along the coast.

Jan Smith, Director of the Massachusetts Bays Program, is a co-organizer of the effort who stresses the importance of bringing the best people together to identify species. “There are a very limited number of people in the world with the expertise to quickly and accurately identify marine species. We have recruited scientists from Holland, Brazil, Canada and throughout the U.S. to make this monitoring effort possible. With the aid of researchers and laboratories at UNH, we will be able to identify a wide-range of specimens, some of which may be new bioinvaders.”

An example of a bioinvader the team will be looking for is the Chinese mitten crab. Originally from Asia, this medium-sized crab first appeared on the west coast of the United States in the early 1990s. The crab lives in both fresh and saltwater and competes for food and space with native species. Its habit of burrowing into stream banks has been especially damaging to earthen dams and delicate shorelines. In 2005, Chesapeake Baymen reported catching Chinese mitten crab in their blue crab traps. Two years later, the invasive crabs had reached Delaware Bay. And just last month, a male crab was found in the Hudson River. Smith notes, “This is not good news for New England.”

The Northeast RAS is just one of the monitoring efforts supported by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project. “Monitoring the environmental condition of our estuaries is the only way to effectively manage these vital natural resources,” notes Jennifer Hunter, Director of the New Hampshire Estuaries Project. “By routinely measuring chemical indicators, like dissolved inorganic nitrogen; biological indicators, like oyster bed size; and even human-caused indicators, such as rate of development; we can identify trends that show environmental degradation before it is too late to do anything about it.”

The Northeast RAS is a collaborative effort of three regional estuary programs, including the New Hampshire Estuaries Project, and is jointly coordinated by the Massachusetts Bays Program and the MIT Sea Grant Program.

The New Hampshire Estuaries Project is a cooperative environmental program involving governmental agencies, universities, non-profit organizations, businesses, and the public to protect, monitor, and enhance the ecological health of the state’s coastal bays and rivers. It is funded in part by a grant from the US Environmental Protection Agency, through an agreement with the University of New Hampshire. For more information, go to www.nhep.unh.edu.

Special interviews with researchers and photo opportunities in the field and laboratory may be arranged with Dave Kellam at 862-3403

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Internet References:

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