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AFS article recommends changes to “Asian carp”

by Bill Mancini

On multiple levels, it's a sign of the times.

This mind bender has got political correctness, international politics, public relations, journalistic and scientific precision, and exotic species all rolled into one enchilada.

Asian carp (specifically grass carp, bighead carp, black carp, and silver carp) have been with us in North America for quite a few years now.

The species mix around the world, given our ability to transport animals and plants (intentionally or not), is a jumble, and the boundaries continue to blur as modern transport makes our world smaller almost on a daily basis.

Public-agency and university scientists in Ohio and Missouri recently published an article in the American Fisheries Society magazine *Fisheries* [2018, 43(7):311-316] that casts light on how we refer to Asian carp in all types of media here in the U.S.

As the authors explained, “The term ‘Asian carp’ in reference specifically to Bighead Carp, Black Carp, Grass Carp, and Silver Carp first appeared in the refereed literature in 1995..., where it was arguably used as a descriptor for the origin of the species rather than as a name for this group of four fishes.”

They go on to say, “From the perspectives of policy and communications with the public, the term ‘Asian carp’ has led to much confusion. First and foremost, from a strictly biological perspective, Asian carp is often misunderstood as a single species. Second, as a category, it frequently leads to miscommunication with the media, public, and policymakers.”

From a sensitivity and political correctness point of view, the authors cite problems as well. “Use of the term ‘Asian carp’ has received criticism in North America because of the potential for cultural insensitivity to Asian peoples. Use of the term is prone to becoming wrapped up in the debate wherein certain groups regard the concept of invasive species as a form of xenophobia...”

Well, admittedly, when I used the term Asian carp, it never occurred to me that it might be a slur. That's just me. I never gave it too much thought. That's a mistake on my part? I suppose that depends on who you ask.

Next, the authors delved into the translational nuance of the term Asian carp. "From strictly a linguistic perspective, 'Asian carp' as understood by English speakers conveys a completely different meaning than the one intended when translated into Chinese...When English speakers use the term 'Asian carp' to communicate about Bighead carp, Black Carp, Grass Carp, or Silver Carp, Chinese researchers and laypersons hear 'Common Carp.' Thus, 'Asian carp' fails the most fundamental criterion of communication between Chinese and North American researchers and the public."

So, what's the solution to all of this? There are several that the authors suggest or recommend.

1. If you need to use a group term, they might use "major Chinese aquaculture species," or "four major Chinese carps."

2. We could start using the Chinese terms (here we go!--phonetically) "sì dà jiā yú" or simply "jiā yú," which Chinese speakers say is an acceptable shortening and alternative.

This option is not as strange or bizarre as you might think.

The English language is filled with words that we have appropriated from other languages—French, German, Spanish, Italian (the list is long)—and use in our everyday speech.

3. Simply use the common names bighead carp, black carp, grass carp, and silver carp.

The last is the one the authors prefer. But they argue the others are quite acceptable.

Whether we as individuals make the change in our verbal and written presentations or not, this topic is likely to come up again. We are going to see other exotic species at our doorsteps that originate from places far and wide.

From where I sit and until the next one of these head-scratchers comes along, I guess I'll follow my colleagues at the American Fisheries Society and take their advice.

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