How is Biosecurity Queensland managing tilapia?

Biosecurity Queensland maintain a strict no-take approach to anglers retaining tilapia. This is so that there is no ‘value’ associated with the fish, reducing incentive for the deliberate spread of tilapia to create new ‘fisheries’. Queensland has ecologically significant catchments that remain tilapia-free, including the Murray-Darling Basin, Lake Eyre Basin and the majority of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

What are my legal obligation while (tilapia) fishing?

It is important to note that there are no laws stating that you cannot target tilapia – in fact, Biosecurity Queensland encourages it. However, once caught tilapia must be disposed of by either burying above the high water mark near the place of capture, or placing in a nearby bin.

Despite some misconceptions, you will of course be ‘in possession’ of the fish from the point of capture until its disposal. Biosecurity Queensland maintains that as long as you are disposing of the fish as soon as practicable by one of the prescribed manners above, you will not be in breach of any laws.

Why can't we catch tilapia to eat?

While this approach seems like it would help to control the numbers of tilapia, there are several key issues to consider:

- Manual removal of invasive fish species (i.e. fishing) requires that enough individual fish at vulnerable life stages are removed to effectively reduce the population.
- In warmer waters, many populations of tilapia exhibit ‘stunting’, which means they are able to reproduce at very small sizes (9–10 cm). Therefore, removing larger tilapia by fishing may not be an effective method of reducing tilapia population numbers overall.
• Tilapia often thrive when a population is significantly reduced; less fish means more resources for the survivors. Fishing for them can increase their numbers in some habitats.

• Large tilapia are cannibalistic and can eat small tilapia fry – removing the largest individuals through fishing may actually increase population size.

• Most new tilapia infestations are caused by humans moving live fish to new locations; not by natural spread across catchment boundaries. Allowing tilapia to be retained for consumption promotes their spread to create new ‘fisheries’.

Biosecurity Queensland manages the potential for invasive fish spread, including tilapia, using precautionary approaches to better protect our waterways.

How come I can go to the local shop and see tilapia for sale then?

• Frozen imported tilapia are not prohibited matter or restricted matter for the purposes of the Biosecurity Act 2014 (the Act), because when tilapia are dead and frozen they are no longer ‘biosecurity matter’.

• The importation of frozen, packaged fillets or whole tilapia from overseas for human consumption is permitted in Queensland.

• The importation of goods into Australia is controlled by the Australian government (Commonwealth legislation), not the States and Territories.

• If the goods have been legally imported into Australia, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries cannot stop the trade of those goods in Queensland due to the Mutual Recognition Act 1992.

• Providing that legitimate documentation can be produced for the imported tilapia, and it is advertised with the country of origin, it is legal to sell.

• For all food import rules and regulations contact the Australian Department of Agriculture and Water Resources at agriculture.gov.au/import/goods/food.

• Tilapia cannot be captured from the wild in Australia and sold.

Isn’t this giving people a taste for it?

• In general, consumers are less likely to incorporate known invasive species into their diets.

• While tilapia may be a popular table fish for immigrants who come from countries where it is part of the staple diet or culinary culture, in Australia this is not the case.

• Biosecurity Queensland will continue with its educational ‘stop the spread’ campaigns regarding noxious fish, to raise community awareness of the invasive nature of the fish.

Can I target tilapia when I go fishing?

Absolutely! In fact, Biosecurity Queensland encourages responsible recreational fishing for invasive species – they just have to be disposed of by either burying above the high water mark near the place of capture, or placed in a nearby bin.

Why are there invasive fishing competitions if recreational fishing doesn’t work to reduce populations?

Invasive fishing competitions are run by local governments for a variety of reasons, including to:

• Educate the community about the damage invasive fish can do.

• Understand how to restore local environments to help native fish thrive.

• Provide a great community-based family fun day, where everyone gets to wet a line, and identify and remove some invasive fish.

What about an incentive, like 50 cents per fish?

Unfortunately, there are many examples where providing a financial reward has not actually reduced the population levels of invasive fish species. For example, there has commercial fishing for carp for many years in New South Wales, but this has not resulted in any significant reductions in carp populations.

Incentive programs can also encourage people to spread and even breed them to create new fisheries and make money.

What about introducing a commercial tilapia industry?

Biosecurity Queensland maintains a strict ‘no-take’ approach to managing all invasive fish.

By not allowing tilapia to be retained or used for economic gain, there is no ‘value’ for these fish. This discourages purposeful movement and retention of tilapia.

Not having a commercial industry reduces the risk of tilapia being translocated by humans to unaffected catchments to create new ‘fisheries’.

Further information

Further information is available from your local government office, or by contacting Biosecurity Queensland on 13 25 23 or visit biosecurity.qld.gov.au.