



# Floods trigger influx of alien fish species in Kerala

Posted at: 12/09/2018

## Highlights

- The catastrophic floods that caused widespread havoc throughout Kerala last month have released several alien species of fish into waterbodies, raising a threat to the endemic aquatic ecosystem and biodiversity, scientists have reported.
- A joint research team, which carried out a rapid assessment of the impact of the floods on waterbodies, has documented the presence of 11 alien species including the alligator gar (*Atractosteus spatula*), arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*), arowana, giant gourami, grass carp, kissing gourami, (*Heleostoma temminckii*), koi carp, gold fish (*Carassius auratus*), shark catfish also known as Malaysian vaala, red-bellied pacu (*Piaractus brachipomus*) and three-spot gourami and four alien invasive species namely the East African catfish, common carp, tilapia (both cultivated and ornamental varieties) and sucker catfish.
- The researchers from the **University of Kerala, the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences (KUFOS) and the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru**, have established that alien species had escaped in large numbers from flooded commercial and ornamental fish farms.

## **Floodwaters act as a Major route**

- Globally floodwaters have proved to be a major route for the spread of invasive species and, therefore, a precautionary approach is warranted while farming potential invasives along floodplains.
- The proliferation of alien species poses a serious threat to the freshwater ecosystems of Kerala, considered a global hotspot for fish diversity, with about 200 freshwater species of fish, about 30 percentage of them endemic.
- The scientists have called for a ban on the import and farming of alien species like the arapaima and alligator gar.
- Endemic to the Amazon, the Arapaima grows up to 4.5 metres in length and 200 kg in body weight, while the alligator gar, native to the US and Mexico, reaches a body length up to 3 m and weighs around 137 kg.
- Both the species feed voraciously on fish and hence have the potential to cause serious threat to the indigenous fish in the rivers of Kerala.
- Another escapee, the red-bellied pacu which was extensively cultivated in several districts, is currently caught in large numbers from the Vembanad and kole wetlands and backwaters of Kuttanad.
- A native of South America, it is omnivorous, devouring everything from fruits, seeds and nuts to insects, small fish, crustaceans and zooplankton.
- The research team found that the species now abounding in Kerala waters had developed

a preference for snails.

The Hindu



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