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The Killer From Louisiana, on the Loose in Italy

By FRANK BRUNI

MASSACIUCCOLI, Italy, May 16 — At first the Americans were welcome. They were admired. Robust and energetic, they looked like partners in a better, richer future.

But they did not know their place. They did not respect limits. Conquest by conquest, they revealed themselves as too ambitious, too domineering, imposing their will on less truculent populations.

Now many Italians in this northern Tuscan town have had enough.

They would like to say "arrivederci" to the big, red, rapacious Louisiana crawfish.

Lake Massaciuccoli can be seen as the murky, reedy theater for a clash of zoological cultures: the brawny Americans versus the aggrieved Europeans. The drama is an example of nature out of whack that also plays, at least loosely, like an allegory of recent world events.

Italian biologists and wildlife experts say that Louisiana crawfish, brought here more than a decade ago as a culinary experiment, multiplied like mad, ascended the food chain, altered the ecosystem and devoured indigenous flora and fauna, including their European-crawfish cousins.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Sergio Paglialunga, the director of Massaciuccoli Park, which encompasses the lake in which the Louisiana crawfish established its beachhead.

"They eat the vegetation," Mr. Paglialunga said as he rode today in a motorboat that plied the lake's dark, cloudy surface, an opaque cover for the danger that lay beneath. "They eat everything."

Marcello Carrara, a park guard who steered the boat, chimed in, "They even eat the weakest among them."

"They are very aggressive," he added. "It's proof that they aren't from around here."

So park managers and regional biologists are redoubling their efforts to get rid of them.

They said that one of the few species of lake fish that could turn the clawed predators into crawling prey was the pike, armies of which are being deployed to the field — or, rather, pool — of battle.

The first troops arrived four years ago, and the reinforcements are still coming. While biologists pressed about 6,000 pike into service from 1999 to the end of 2002, they said they would dump 10,000 to 15,000 pike into the lake this year.

"We have changed the rules," said Paolo Ercolini, a biologist who is closely monitoring the situation.

Somebody else changed the rules in the first place, and that was the problem.

Mr. Ercolini and others familiar with the history say it happened around 1990, when a local entrepreneur decided to farm Louisiana crawfish in this broad, marshy lake, once one of Puccini's favorite haunts.

(A lakefront cafe here is named Butterfly, after one of his best-loved operas, "Madame Butterfly," another tale of an American whose foreign trip takes a fatal toll.)

Similar experiments with Louisiana crawfish had been conducted in Spain and other European countries, which were drawn to the species because it was hardier and meatier than its Continental counterparts. There was commercial promise in the enterprise, and no one around Lake Massaciuccoli raised much of a warning or fuss.

Sure enough, a modest market for the crawfish developed. But as the years went by, there were unintended effects.

Accounts differ about how the crawfish spread. Maybe the local entrepreneur abandoned his crawfish farm, which had been limited to a small area. Maybe flooding lifted the crawfish over their confines. Maybe the crawfish staged a jailbreak.

In any case, certain types of fish and frogs in the lake suddenly became scarce — or worse.

"We put the puzzle together," said Mr. Paglialunga, who went on to cite a clue that no detective could miss. "Fishermen found fish half-eaten in the net, with crawfish hanging onto them."

The Louisiana crawfish were not only more gluttonous and brutish than their delicate European cousins. They also had an expansionist streak.

Biologists and park managers said the Louisiana crawfish would walk from one source of water to another, colonizing areas far beyond Massaciuccoli.

"Now you find them in all of Tuscany," Mr. Paglialunga said.

He said he could not be sure they had managed that feat entirely on their own spindly legs. "There are some legends of how they spread so quickly to other parts, like someone

near Florence bought them for dinner, didn't like the taste and tossed the rest in the river," he said.

The crawfish inspired academic papers. They got a reputation.

"Their march, strangely a forward march, is determined and relentless, like advancing marines," reads an article, titled "Killer Crawfish," on one of several Italian Web sites with musings about the strange invaders. "You find them everywhere," the article says. "In the middle of the street, in the city, on the house's doorstep."

They can also be found in the nets of Lake Massaciuccoli fishermen, who now catch them deliberately because there is still a market for them and no longer enough indigenous crawfish to sell.

As several fishermen hauled in about 100 Louisiana crawfish early this evening and Mr. Ercolini and Francesca Gherardi, another biologist, watched, the group's chatter was not entirely anti-American.

It betrayed a grudging respect.

"They are beautiful animals," Ms. Gherardi said as she carefully held a crimson specimen aloft. It thrashed its tail furiously.

"They are competitors," Mr. Ercolini said, noting that the pike had their work cut out for them. "It will be a battle."

"They are tyrannical," said Francesco Gilarducci, a fisherman, but he quickly added that they were also tasty.

At a recent party, he said, he and several friends "ate tons of them."

"They are exquisite with spaghetti," he said.

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