



A red-belly piranha is shown captured in Venezuela.

Aldemaro Romero | Special to The Sun

Piranhas' arrival in Arkansas possible, but not probable

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

In the July 16, edition of *The Jonesboro Sun*, it was reported that a piranha-like fish had been caught by a Bono woman in an area creek. The species was correctly identified by officials of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission as a pacu, an Amazonian fish that resembles the famous piranhas.

Since then I have been asked whether or not it is possible to find actual piranhas in Arkansas. The answer is very simple: pos-

sible, yes; probable, not yet.

For years exotic species have been introduced in the United States by unscrupulous pet traders or just careless amateurs. And piranhas have been no exception.

In 1979 researchers of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission reported that a reproducing population of piranhas was discovered in south Florida. These fish had been stocked in a pool in a local zoo since at least 1964. In other words, they had survived for 15 years overcom-

PLEASE SEE **PIRANHAS, A9**

PIRANHAS: Don't import species from other countries into the U.S.

FROM PAGE A8

ing cold temperatures and droughts while being able to reproduce.

Once alerted, Florida officials proceeded to extirpate this population.

In 1995 a researcher from the University of Hawaii reported that piranhas had been found in that state. Study of the ear stones known as otoliths showed the fish examined had grown very fast once released in the Hawaiian natural environment.

Many piranhas have been confiscated by U.S. authorities when being smuggled into the country, and I have personally seen some of these fish in pet shops in Miami. They were probably imported under false names and then advertised as what they were.

In fact, piranhas are dangerous fish once released in the environment.

Think again

Some may think it is not very likely these tropical fish could survive the colder waters of Arkansas, but think again. A group of researchers from the University of Northern Texas published a report in 1997 stating that red-bellied piranhas (among the most aggressive species) were

capable to survive winter temperatures anywhere in the southern United States.

Piranha is a generic name for about 20 species of fishes found in the Orinoco and Amazon watersheds where they can be quite abundant. Part of their ecological success resides in their ability to adapt to a wide range of environments and food sources.

The question is what to do to avoid this and other exotic animal species becoming established in Arkansas?

First, do not bring exotic species into the United States. Only acquire pets from reputable pet shops so you know that what you are buying is legal. Do not dispose of live, exotic animals in the wild. Either destroy them or give them to local authorities or university scientists. Report any strange creature to authorities or to a reputable scientist like the ones at Arkansas State University.

For more information contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

Dr. Romero is chairman and professor at the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State University.