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Michigan crawfish invasion? Louisiana experts come to the rescue, and to feast

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Jesse Guidry, vice president of communications for Lafayette Travel, picks up plastic crawfish, crawfish beads and other items from the Breaux Bridge Visitor's Center Wednesday, August 16, 2017, in Breaux Bridge, La. Guidry, along with Cajun chefs, musicians and crawfish experts will host an educational crawfish-themed mini-festival in partnership with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources that will give residents an opportunity to learn about the crawfish invasion happening in their waterways and how Louisiana could offer help.

Advocate staff photo by LESLIE WESTBROOK

As Michigan grapples with a never-before-seen invasion of red swamp "crayfish" threatening cities' infrastructures and ecosystems, mudbug experts from Lafayette have organized a Cajun culture lesson delivered in the way only Louisianians know how — a party.

The event, organized by Lafayette Travel and set for Saturday afternoon in Vicksburg, Michigan, is intended to introduce Michiganders to Lafayette and its beloved delicacy.

A five-person team of travel agency employees and chefs was set to depart Thursday in a rental SUV teeming with crawfish trap equipment and fake crawfish, coloring sheets and, most importantly, mounds of frozen crawfish tails.

Can't see the video below? Click here.

Hosted in tandem with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the event will feature informational sessions on setting traps for the crustaceans, a panel discussion on whether the creature is a "friend or foe" and live music by Sel de Terre, an Ann Arbor, Michigan-based Cajun band.

Lauren "Lunch Lady" Liner and Sean Suire, co-owners of Cajun Table, a Lafayette-based seafood restaurant, will prepare crawfish étouffée using 15 pounds of crawfish tails, as importing live crawfish into Michigan is illegal.

Liner said both the novelty of Cajun cuisine and a free festival in the northern state will make her and Suire's "little taste of home" an experiment on both sides of the pot.

"Whether they're freaked out or grossed out or what, it's going to be really educational," she said.



'Mini-lobsters' have Michigan on alert after invasive, Louisiana crawfish found in waters

Although a treat that commonly replaces traditional holiday fare on Louisiana dinner tables, the red swamp crayfish is a more prolific breeder than the other nine crayfish species found in Michigan, said Nick Popoff, the DNR's aquatic species and regulatory affairs manager.

The large amounts of red swamp crayfish they are encountering pose a threat to both the environment and structures such as dams, irrigation systems and levees.

Saturday's event, set alongside one of the lakes where the crayfish invaded, will include a screening of the documentary "King Crawfish," as well as readings from the children's book series "Clovis the Crawfish."

Jesse Guidry, vice president of communications for the Lafayette tourism agency, said the event will also connect local officials with crawfishermen and researchers to find solutions to what has proven to be a serious problem in Michigan and to come up with expedited harvesting solutions in a lake setting.

While there, Guidry, his two co-workers from Lafayette Travel and Cajun Table will promote Festivals Acadiens et Creoles, Festival International and the Louisiana Crawfish festival. Above all, he said, the Lafayette team is "going to try to bring as close as a Louisiana crawfish festival" as they can manage to the small village in southern Michigan.

Popoff said he hopes the event will educate locals on Louisiana traditions and how Michigan residents can set out traps of their own — all the while serving as a public service announcement that dissuades residents from illegally importing live crawfish into the state.

Although an exact cause for the species' sudden appearance is unknown, a news release from Michigan's Department of Natural Resources states that the crawfish may have been introduced by people using the crustacean as bait, boiling them live for dinner or keeping them as pets.

News of the new crayfish species' entry into the Great Lakes State broke in late July when the dark-red delicacy infested Sunset Lake in Vickburg, Michigan, and a retention pond in Novi, Michigan.

The state is home to nine other crayfish species. The rusty crayfish is the only other crayfish species the state has deemed invasive.

Popoff said his department has trapped 15-20 crayfish per day in Vickburg and as many as 2,500 in the smaller Novi location.

"That speaks to the density that could be achieved by these critters," he said.

Online commenters from Louisiana had their own solutions in mind. Guidry recalled viewing comments such as "Mais, cook 'em" or "I'm going up to Michigan to get me some crawfish" infiltrated forums after Southerners caught wind of the event.

Guidry said Lafayette Travel paid close attention to how the event was coordinated to avoid making light of a sensitive situation.

"We don't want to go up there and make fun of this," he said. "We want to partner with people and we want to have a good taste in their mouth so they remember Lafayette, Louisiana and crawfish."

MORE INFORMATION



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