

Scientists urge ban on import of sinister seaweed

By Traci Watson
USA TODAY

A beautiful but sinister seaweed has taken over the Mediterranean Sea in the last few years, choking corals, blanketing sandy bottoms and fouling fishermen's nets. Scientists fear that it could invade waters in the USA, where it is presently confined to tanks in aquarium stores and fish collectors' homes.

So great is the alarm that more than 100 scientists sent a letter to Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt this week urging a ban on any further im-

port of the *Caulerpa taxifolia*. "If (use) continues, it is likely only a matter of time before. . . . *Caulerpa taxifolia* is released and becomes established in the United States," the letter says. Their fears are founded on the way the seaweed spread into the Mediterranean — from a public aquarium.

Representatives of the aquarium industry say *Caulerpa* is not widely imported, but scientists say that when they looked for it at aquarium stores near San Francisco, they found it in several locations.

Once it is in home aquariums, they

say, the weed could easily make it into the wild. Many aquarium owners dump the contents into local waterways, under the mistaken impression that they are "freeing" the plants and animals. Hundreds of non-native species have invaded U.S. waters after being imported for aquariums.

The seaweed in question has been compared to living Astroturf because of its carpet-like growth. The original *Caulerpa* lives in the Red Sea. But the form that is spreading was bred in European aquariums. It was released into the Mediterranean by the

aquarium in Monaco and now covers tens of thousands of acres off the coasts of Italy and France.

Wherever *Caulerpa* grows, scientists say, nothing else does. It smothers all other sea life. Fishermen working in affected sites haul up nets full of *Caulerpa* and little more.

Almost nothing can get rid of the weed. "They tried warm water, they tried copa (coconut fiber), they tried salt," says Alexandre Meinesz of the University of Nice. The *Caulerpa* always grows back.

The Interior Department has not responded to the scientists' request

for a ban on sales and import. If it does ban import, it will take six months or longer for a ban to take effect.

That frustrates scientists. Andrew Cohen of the San Francisco Estuary Institute says that if two years go by, the weed could be established in the waters of the USA.

Representatives of the marine aquarium industry say they are against importing anything that is dangerous to the environment but are concerned that requesting government regulations is an overreaction.



By Alexandre Meinesz, University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis
Caulerpa taxifolia: Smothering other sea life in the Mediterranean.