

Sea squirt invades Strangford Lough

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The carpet sea squirt was found about three weeks ago

An invasive alien marine creature that can smother native species has been found in Strangford Lough.

The carpet sea squirt was found about three weeks ago on a routine check by environmental officials of the lough.

They are now trying to find out how far it has spread.

Although it may be in the very early stages, if it is not dealt with it could have very serious consequences, not only for the economy, but also the ecology of Strangford Lough.

Off the east coast of America it spread over hundreds of square kilometres of seabed. The squirts attach themselves to the hulls of boats and the seabed smothering everything in their path.

This will affect sailors, fishermen, leisure users and the whole ecology of Lough.

They are mainly transported over longer distances on boat hulls, but larvae and fragments can also be spread by fishing equipment, the movement of fishing nets and tidal currents.

They were also found in Wales at Holyhead, forcing a clean-up operation which cost £600,000.

The problem with cleaning it out of the lough is that because of the currents divers can only dive for a couple of hours a day.

Joe Breen of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency said: "It grows over living creatures, it will even grow over seaweed and the speed at which it will grow, it will actually outgrow most species.

"The problem is, because it's Japanese this isn't its native habitat so it's got no known predators within our waters.

"If it decides to grow there's very little we can do about it."

Sea squirts love warmth - as it helps them grow, however, it is during the winter that they breed, releasing their tadpole-like young and spread.

That is why the Department of Environment needs to find out how bad the situation is and try to deal with it.

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