

Sea Potato Invasion Hits Rhode Island Shoreline

by TODD McLEISH / ecoRI News



During a class field trip to Mackerel Cove in Jamestown, R.I., in 2017, University of Rhode Island student Jacob Reilly picked up an unusual brown seaweed that looked like a hollow ball and asked his professor what it was. The answer was a surprise.

Reilly had stumbled upon the first appearance in Rhode Island of what has come to be called **sea potatoes** (*Colpomenia peregrina*), an invasive seaweed native to the coast of Korea and Japan that grows on top of other seaweeds.

“It’s not a parasite; it just settles and grows on top of other algae,” said **Lindsay Green-Gavrielidis**, a marine ecologist and URI postdoctoral researcher who teaches the class. “We don’t know what impact it’s having on native seaweeds, though we hypothesize that it may be in direct competition for nutrients and light. But nobody has done any research to quantify its impact.”

Green-Gavrielidis has a history with the invader. Sea

potatoes had been unintentionally introduced to Europe sometime in the early 1900s, probably in ship ballast, and from there it made its way to Nova Scotia in the 1960s. It took until 2010 for it to be

discovered in the Gulf of Maine, when Green-Gavrielidis found it while conducting research for her doctorate at the University of New Hampshire.

In addition to the ball-shaped form it typically takes, the seaweed also forms a crust that grows on rocks that easily goes unnoticed, so Green-Gavrielidis speculated that it may have been “hiding out for a long time like that, and then when the conditions were right the ball form started appearing.”

The appearance of sea potatoes along the Rhode Island coast is significant because it has crossed what Green-Gavrielidis

calls a major biogeography boundary: Cape Cod.

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Sea potatoes are native to the coasts of Korea and Japan

D.E.M.

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