



Biological Invasions

Kathy Gerst
Dept. of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology



What is an Invasive Species?

- Plants, animals, & microbes not native to a region
- Introduced accidentally or intentionally
- Out-compete native species for available resources, reproduce prolifically, and dominate regions and ecosystems.
- Difficult to control w/o native predators
- *Remember: not all invasive species are exotic, and not all exotic species are invasive!*



Historical Context in North America

- Originally viewed as welcome additions to landscape!
- Domesticated plants and animals
- Ornamental plants and animals to remind settlers of home

Current state

- More than 6,500 species of established, self-sustaining populations of non-native animals, plants, and microbes in the U.S.
- result from: increased movements of people, transportation of products, and reduced travel time between destinations



How serious of a problem?

- Costs due to invasive spp. in U.S. is \$125-140 billion / year.
- 25% of US agriculture GNP lost to foreign pests
- Nearly 1/2 of species listed as threatened or endangered under the E.S.A. are at risk due to competition with or predation by non-native species
- Considered by biologists to be the second greatest threat to biodiversity!

Not all Introduced Species Are Successful

The "Tens Rule":

- 10% of non-native species become established
- 10% of those become ecological problems (invasives!!)

Characteristics of Invasive Species

- Widespread distribution (AND abundance)
- Great dispersal ability or migratory tendencies
- Great reproductive capability; being r-selected
- Early maturation; short generation time
- Small body size
- Edge species
- Affinity with humans (anthrophilic)
- Capacity for clonal/asexual reproduction

Characteristics of Invaded Habitats

- Disturbance
- Low diversity
- Absence of predators of invading species
- Absence of native species morphologically or ecologically similar to invader
- Absence of predators or grazers in evolutionary history (naive prey)

Accidental Introductions

- Seeds on livestock
- Disease on agricultural and forestry plants
- Aquatic organisms in ship ballast waters from international shipping
- Canals that connect formerly disconnected oceans, seas, and lakes



Zebra Mussels

- fresh water mussels native to Black Sea
- transported to Great Lakes via ballast water from a trans-oceanic vessel.
- Mussel discovered near Detroit in 1988.
- down to Gulf of Mexico and into Connecticut
- cover large areas of lakes & rivers, prevent establishment of native species, clog pipes.



Escaped Introductions

- Agricultural species
- Ornamental species

aquarium fish,
residential trees,
European birds



Intentional Introductions

- Planted for erosion control, forage, forestry
- Introduced for hunting, fishing



Arundo donax: Giant Reed

Ecological Impacts of Invasive Species

1. Direct interactions with native species:
 - Competition
 - Predation
2. Impact ecosystem function
3. Spread of disease
4. Hybridization with natives

Ecological Impacts

1. Direct interactions with native species:

Competition and Predation

- Compete for light, space, nutrients, pollinators, etc.
- Community has evolved without defense mechanisms to non-native predators

Purple Loosestrife

- Aggressive wetland invader
- Produce up to 2.7 million seeds per plant yearly
- Spreads across approximately 480,000 additional hectares of wetlands each year
- Local fauna do NOT eat plant
- Did not become invasive for first 100 years in U.S.



Kudzu Vine

- fast-growing vine introduced to prevent soil erosion
- major pest in the southern US.
- Grows up to 1 foot/day
- Costs \$50 million/year in lost farm & timber production



Brown Tree Snake

- originating in the South Pacific and Australia
- extirpated 10 of 13 native bird species, 6 of 12 native lizard species, and 2 of 3 bat species on the island of Guam
- Now found on Hawaii



Domestic Cats

- Originated from wild cats in the middle east
- Hunt native birds, lizards, small mammals
- Carry infectious diseases that can be transferred to native animals, domestic livestock, and humans
- VERY significant impact on islands where native birds have not evolved to fear predators



Insect Invasions

- Argentine Ants
- Fire Ants
- Africanized Honey bees
- Asian long-horned beetle



Grasses in the Sonoran Desert

• Buffel grass from Africa is the most rapidly spreading invasive plant in Arizona

• Promotes fire and re-sprout easily

• Decreases water filtration into the soil

• Fire is NOT a natural part of the saguaro-palo verde plant communities
• (Kills tortoises too ☹)

• Invasion facilitated by open space in desert: entire structure of communities changes



Ecological Impacts

2. Change to ecosystem function

- Biogeochemistry (ex: change in soil type)
- Biophysical processes (water uptake and transpiration)
- Trophic structure (food webs)
- Disturbance regime (ex: fire)

Ecological Impacts

3. **Disease:** invasive species may carry diseases to which native species are not adapted.

- Avian malaria
- Chestnut blight
- Dutch Elm disease
- Small pox... ?



Chestnut Blight

- Deciduous forests of eastern NA
- Made up to 40% of overstory trees
- In early 1900s fungal disease noticed
- Fungus originated in nursery stock from Asia where it is native
- Many animal species depend on chestnuts; 7 spp. of moths and butterflies now extinct

Ecological Impacts

4. Hybridization

- introduced species may not be genetically separated from a native species, and can proceed to hybridize.
Ex: introduced trout.
→ may mean the end of a genetically unique local population.



Invasives on Islands

Example: Hawaii

- 50% of flora considered invasive. Prior to human colonization over 90% of flora was endemic
- All reptiles and amphibians are introduced.
- Over 100 species of birds introduced.
- Mass extinctions of native flora and fauna are in progress due to destruction of habitat and invasion of new species.

Salt Cedar (Tamarisk)

- Introduced as an ornamental and for windbreaks
- Invades riparian areas
- Accumulates salts in tissues which alters soil composition
- Uses lots of water!
- Provides poor wildlife habitat
- Forms monocultures
- decreases biodiversity



Biological Control

- Used successfully in the U.S. since 1889
- About 420 invasive spp. have been controlled successfully with biocontrol
- Benefit/cost ratio can be very high: the derived benefit of controlling a pest divided by the total cost of the biological control project.

Control and Management Options

- **Inspection/restrictions** on travel and trade
- **Genetic breeding**
- **Eradication**: physically remove plants/animals
- **Herbicides**: chemically kill (plants)
- **Exotic pests**: bring in biological control agent

Management of Salt Cedar

- **Manual removal**
 - Costly and takes a LONG time
- **Chemical/herbicide**
- **Restore flood regime**
- **Biological control**
 - use of natural enemies to reduce damage caused by pest population
 - Possible more effective and less costly solution???



Why introduce insect herbivores?

- Salt cedar has little/no natural enemies in new habitat
- This gives it a competitive advantage over native species
- Introduction of herbivores from native habitat will help control it and slow reproduction

Diorhabda elongata

- Beetle co-evolved with salt cedar in China.
- Salt cedar is only plant insect feeds or reproduces on
- Has special adaptations to be a specialist on salt cedar



Salt Cedar defoliation: NV



The Big Question: What if the biocontrol agent itself becomes invasive??

- Beetle was tested for 13 years in quarantine before release to be sure it was not going to feed on native plants
- The very small risk of beetle changing hosts are outweighed by benefits
- Tamarisk has no close relatives in N.A.



Biocontrol Success Stories

- Prickly Pear Cactus and moth borer in Australia (1926)
- Vedalia Beetle in California; saved citrus industry from scales: 1890s
- Cassava mealybug in Africa with a wasp from South America (1980s)



Biocontrol Horror Stories

- Cane Toads in Australia: introduced to control Cane grub
Cane Toads: An Unnatural History 1987
- Rosy Wolfsnail in Hawaii: introduced to control Giant African Snail. Prefers small native spp. (15-20 native snails extinct)



Biocontrol mistakes

- Take home message:
 - Control agent must be a specialist on target!
 - Generalist vertebrates = bad biocontrol
- Some of worst invaders today were originally introduced for control of other invasive species
- What works in one site, won't work in others

Conclusion

- Invasive species are a threat to human health, biodiversity and ecosystem functions
- Need to put an **ECONOMIC** value on loss of species, habitats, and ecosystem functions as a result of invasive species impact
- Most important solution is early detection and **PREVENTION!**
- **EDUCATION**