



Friend, Foe, Wonder, Peril

Brendon Larson

Invasive species are all of these.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I interviewed a 92-year-old Haida elder about the effects of introduced Sitka black-tailed deer on the ecosystems of Haida Gwaii. Something he said struck me: “I look at deer the same way as white man and what they’ve done to us.” This comment points to a serious limitation in our usual perception of invasive species as a problem in themselves, rather than a symptom –

a riffle within a torrent of global change brought about by our species.

We currently face diverse environmental consequences of how we have chosen to live on our home planet – from global warming and habitat loss to increasing nitrogen deposition and plummeting water tables. In the context of this large-scale change, invasive species are a convenient focus for activity. It’s relatively easy to feel

you can do something about them – you simply reach down and uproot a plant or cull an unwanted mammal. Yet the fact remains that even if we could eliminate these species, much greater problems would remain and inexorable change would continue.

I may come across as pessimistic, even apathetic. I’m not. Instead, I see invasive species in two quite different – yet defensible – ways.

On the one hand, as a naturalist, I recognize that invasive species can be pernicious. These new plants and animals from far-away lands are taking over. They’ve driving out some of the species I have grown to know and love.

On the other hand, I can view these changes with greater acceptance. Species come and go. They always have. Some we like; some we don’t. Who made us the kings and queens of creation?

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Here, I realize that my desire for one particular species over another has been partly learned – it’s even nostalgic. Many species are being lost; yes, that’s sad. But blaming invasive species for these changes is misplaced.

I’m not sure I’ll ever choose between these extreme views, for the in-between is much richer and more challenging. A vignette helps to explain what I mean. I grew up in Southern Ontario’s “banana belt,” alongside numerous rare and restricted Carolinian species, including blue ash, Kentucky coffee-tree, Eastern prickly pear cactus and swamp rose-mallow. It was a fragmented landscape, but my explorations were idyllic since I could walk untrammelled along hedgerows from one woodlot to another. As you can imagine, much has since changed, causing some native species to decline. Invasive species, however, are far from my biggest concern. Instead, it is something much less ominous, much more mundane.

Consider the 10-kilometre route my father and I run along the country roads. When we began, 27 years ago, we passed 10 homes. Now, 41 mailboxes mark our course and 13 of the new homes have been built in woodlots. Recently, the neighbouring farmer subdivided his forest, a focal point of my rambling, into three estate lots. Almost everywhere the story is the same: Yes, we have invasive species, but we have something else too: Human habits are just as much to blame.

I continue this childhood story with another worrying trend. I have fond memories of a class trip to Point Pelee National Park where the naturalists did an excellent job of showing us around and teaching us about the organisms that lived there. It was a magical day. Now, I worry that litanies against invasive species are replacing these wondrous experiences. Instead of learning to delight in nature, students learn what is wrong with it. I suspect they’ll be less likely to want to return.

It is possible to go too far here. I have no wish to be a defender of invasive species or to have developers adapt my arguments to defend their destruction of existing habitats, or to avoid expensive restoration. Even so, I feel that the way we typically conceptualize invasive species is too habitual. We need to be more aware of its shadow side. We need to face the hard questions about our place in nature and our role in the spread of these species. We need to become more intimate with invasive species.

With a little more intimacy, we’d hear strains of the same old humanist tune in our approach to invasive species. We may feel good about ourselves by pulling a few non-native plants out of a wetland or eradicating rats from an island, yet many of these species are clearly here to stay. Realistic projections based on the ongoing expansion of global trade further

suggest that new exotic species will continue to arrive. With ongoing global climatic change, the distinction between mere “exotic” species and more problematic “invasive” ones may become less and less useful, but we still imagine ourselves controlling them. David Ehrenfeld called this belief, that we can put things back in order with assiduousness, greater scientific knowledge and technological know how, the “arrogance of humanism.”

We hold onto this belief, I suspect, because we like to think we have created a nice, tidy, managed world. We do what it takes to remove species we don’t want. For example, in many areas we’ve extinguished most of the original landscape and replaced it with invasive agricultural species. Now we eradicate weeds from these places. We apply a similar managerial ethos to reduce the economic disruption caused by invasive species elsewhere.

One reason we have invasive species, however, is that we’re cutting environmental corners to reduce economic costs and inconvenience elsewhere. How many of us have stopped driving our cars or travelling abroad to prevent the spread of invasive species? How many of us clean our boots after forays in foreign lands? How many of us buy food and other products from afar? How many of us import exotic plants for our gardens? We want the wheat without the chaff, counting on our ingenuity to set things straight.

This managerial ethos extends to our concerns about the effects of invasive species on biodiversity itself. We denounce foresters for thinking of forests as mere board-feet and fishers for thinking of fish as mere kilos for Captain High Liner, but we have ourselves reduced life to a particular and limited vision of diversity, one focusing on biotic communities as mere repositories of native species.

We have set aside certain areas as “natural,” as “parks” and “wilderness” that we especially wish to preserve from the impacts of “non-native” species. These parks are meant to be orderly and to provide a particular nature for our benefit and for our use. Here we have nature-without-humans, a product for the consumption of generally wealthy, well-educated people. The rest is nature-with-humans, which those same people tend to eschew.

As conservationists, we need to reflect upon whether we truly want to promote managerial enmity towards the natural world. We have made an enemy of invasive species to justify controlling and subjugating them; they have been reduced to an “other” rather than an element of biodiversity that we care about. Yet many who oppose these species only recognize the few non-native species they’ve been taught – and taught to dislike – rather than having a deeper knowledge of the species around them.

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We might instead see these species through a lens of appreciation, as one of the last vestiges of that nature which the romantics so loved, that which was beyond our control. Invasive species may thus reflect our own “thrown-ness” in the world – existentially we are but brief candles who have no awareness of why we were lit or when and why we will go out.

The poet Mary Oliver once alluded to this perspective when she remarked that purple loosestrife is “alien here but what does that mean – it is recklessly gorgeous.” Can we appreciate invasive species in a similar way? It is worth recalling that native and non-native species look quite similar from a distance. Without knowing the species specifically, there is no way to tell by sight or smell, taste or touch, whether or not it is native. Once we learn the “nativity story” of a species, however, we categorize it as “good” or “bad,” thereby slanting our perspective on the landscape in which it is embedded.

We may feel we’re losing something when one of these new species arrives, for they force us to see ourselves when we look at the natural world. We cannot maintain the illusion of nature unadorned. But perhaps this is an important reminder that we’re not so separate after all. And that not everything should be a target for management.

This past summer, my six-year-old daughter and I passed through airport security in Los Angeles. We put our bags on the conveyer for the X-ray machine, and then walked through the body scanner. We were “clean” and thus directed to pick up our things. From out of nowhere, however, an agent suddenly demanded, “Was that bear X-rayed?” My daughter was clutching her teddy bear. I asked him if he was seriously going to make us reverse our steps to send her bear through the machine. He was.

That experience led me to imagine an Orwellian future where visitors to a “native park” are greeted by a cop with a “bioscanner” who ensures you’re not carrying any potentially invasive biotic material. The park itself is surrounded by an invisible, anti-biological fence, to keep what is “native” in and what is “exotic” out. Nature so protected would be contrived. It would be artificial – just another product of the managerial ethos we apply elsewhere. This form of nature would be so secluded that it would devalue the everyday landscapes we actually inhabit.

A little rethinking of our managerial ethos towards invasive species might encourage some constructive conversations about the undertones of invasion biology: our grief, our sorrow, our anger, our regret and even our hopes. In the process, we could discuss our relation to change, to uncertainty, to a deepening sense that we truly do have global impacts. We feel we can put things back in order by removing invasive species, but I’m unconvinced that there

was ever such a fixed state to begin with or that humans have ever demonstrated such an ability.

When we dislike something as much as we dislike invasive species, we have something to learn from that response. This does not mean that every invasive species should be allowed to enter and run amuck, yet it does mean that they can encourage us, together, to ripen our vision of humanity and nature. The eminent conservation biologist Michael Soulé has pointed out that “mixoecology,” a blend of the old species and the new, is part of our future; now we have to figure out as a society what it will look like, where we can control it and where we cannot. This is our challenge, rather than merely reiterating our dislike for certain species. In the process, we will necessarily have to give up some of our preconceptions about what “nature” can and should be. Otherwise, we will continue a battle we can’t win: a battle against ourselves, one run by unexamined scripts rather than ongoing reflection.

If we don’t reconsider our response to invasive species, our children will grow up in a world where the species spreading around them will increasingly be denounced. They will learn, implicitly, that proper nature is neat and tidy and controlled, rather than potentially reckless and beyond our control.

It would be sadly ironic if those of us who are informed about biodiversity teach our children and students that these species around us are not quite right, while the less-informed let their kids explore the woods and meadows of a world that is still beyond human-knowing, beyond labels of what is native and what isn’t. Unless such innocence has been entirely lost, these landscapes can still, validly, be loved. But for us, the abstraction of biodiversity may be a set-up for dissatisfaction with the world as it actually is.

This spring, I listened to a starling on a wire overhead as it sang, mimicking a yellow warbler. This blending made me wonder:

Between the starling and the yellow warbler
whom does the Earth love more?

Or, to return to my experience on Haida Gwaii:

Between humanity and invasive species
whom does the Earth love more? 🐦

*Brendon Larson, an assistant professor in the Department of Environment and Resource Studies at the University of Waterloo, expects to ruffle some feathers with his unconventional view on invasive species. His final lines are offered with apologies to Pablo Neruda’s *Book of Questions*.*

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