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’re 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?
We have made an enemy of invasive species to justify controlling and subjugating them. 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 was beyond our control. Invasive species may thus reflect our own “thrownness” in the world. We have had the luxury of being able to use whatever tools we have to put things back in order with assiduousness, greater scientific knowledge and technological know how, the “arrogance of humanism.” We hold onto this belief, 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 not so separate after all. And that not everything is the same: Yes, we have invasive species, but we have some-thing new, too. Otherwise, our perspective on the landscape in which it is embedded.

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 recently. The neighbor- bouring 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 new, too. Otherwise, our perspective on the landscape in which it is embedded.

Further, we have set aside certain areas as “natural,” as “parks” and “bioscanner” who ensures you’re not carrying any potentially invasive biotic material. The park itself is surrounded by an "alien here but we especially wish to preserve from the� nature so protected would be contrived. It would be as if we are choosing to cut a “natural park” are greeted by a cop with a “bouncer 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 as if we are choosing to cut a “natural park” are greeted by a cop with a “bouncer 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 as if we are choosing to cut a “natural park” are greeted by a cop with a “bouncer 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 sad irony if those of us who are informed about biodiversity teach our children and students that these areas are secluded that it would devalue the everyday landscapes we actually inhabit.

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.

When we dislike something as much as we dislike invasive species, we have something to learn from that response. This discontent does not mean that every invasive species should be allowed to enter and run amuck, yet it does mean that they can encourage us, to ripen our vision of humanity and nature. The eminent conservation biologist Michael Soué has pointed out the importance 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 denouncing or allowing them to exist. 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 sad irony if those of us who are informed about biodiversity teach our children and students that these areas are secluded that it would devalue the everyday landscapes we actually inhabit.

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Instead, it is something much less ominous, much more mundane.

We need to become more intimate with invasive species.