



Science for Environment Policy

Does the public's view of invasive alien species differ from the professionals'?

Key differences between public and professional opinions on invasive alien species (IAS) are highlighted by a recent UK study. Its authors recommend clearer, open discussion of the harm caused by IAS and human responsibility for their spread.

Understanding public opinion regarding IAS is vital; in the past, public response to proposed IAS management has delayed action, occasionally even to the point where eradication is no longer possible. In this study, researchers explored the views of different groups of individuals from the north of the UK. These included the general public, conservation volunteers and professional ecologists, as well as interested professionals, such as forestry managers and anglers.

Using nine focus group sessions and three interviews, totalling 79 participants overall, the researchers identified recurring themes in discussions. In particular, the researchers explored how the perception of species attributes (e.g. 'harmfulness') was linked with attitudes towards both species and management strategies.

Five attributes of IAS were repeatedly mentioned by participants across all groups. These included: impact on the [economy](#) or character of a place; whether humans were intentionally involved in the introduction process; non-nativeness; controllability and attractiveness of the species.

The non-native nature of a species was emphasised more by ecologists than by the general public. Ecologists were also more likely to associate this attribute with human-led introduction and harm to the environment. In contrast, the public simply defined non-native as being from a different region.

There were also important differences between ecologists and the public in terms of strategies for controlling IAS, which were discussed in a general way by the public. Many suggested that trapping and culling are the most effective measures. However, ecologists and other interested professionals tended to discuss control for specific cases, highlighting the need for different approaches to fit the context.

Moral issues surrounding control were emphasised more by members of the public, who held a general view that if a process was natural, i.e. not caused by humans, we should not interfere.

The study's authors stress that these results cannot be assumed to reflect the views of the wider public, as only a relatively small number of people participated. However, they also suggest that there is no reason to believe that they should differ markedly from other opinions found in north-western Europe.

In conclusion, the authors recommend that factors that concern the public, such as harm caused by a species and human responsibility for IAS spread, should be communicated and addressed explicitly by conservationists. This would benefit not only communication between ecologists and the public, but also scientific debate.

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