



Public Awareness and Policy Effectiveness: the Case of Alien Species

Non-controlled invasive alien species are posing a major threat to ecosystem balance. Scientists have recently determined that socio-demographics factors, as well as the kind of species and the method used, are significant criteria to take into account when designing alien species control and eradication policies. Raising awareness and educating the general public should then become a priority in order to enhance the acceptance and success of such policies.

The financial value of the goods and services provided by ecosystems (e.g. food, forest, water) has been estimated at €26 trillion per year. However, these values can be compromised by the huge loss of biodiversity, which is projected to accelerate 10-fold in Europe by 2050. Biodiversity preservation is therefore considered a priority for EU environment action programmes. In order to "halt the decline of biodiversity by 2010", the "European Strategy on Invasive Alien Species"¹ (i.e. non-native species which jeopardize ecosystems) recommends first preventing their introduction and then eradicating these species.

In order to understand why so little eradication has taken place in Europe, U.K. researchers have recently investigated the factors influencing public attitudes to control and eradication policies. To this end, they sent a questionnaire to 600 Scottish residents, in order to determine their level of support for such policies and the reasons behind this support. Their questionnaire covered several control methods and 15 alien species of mammals, birds, plants, invertebrates, fish and crustaceans.

The main outcomes of their investigation are:

- 85% of the respondents state that protecting the countryside and its wildlife should be a Government funding priority.
- 87% of those interviewed indicate that controlling numbers of some species of wildlife is necessary to preserve the environment, especially when alien species cause economic damage or harm native species.
- For 69%, the control methods used affect the level of support. For instance, people appear to be reluctant to support chemical control (poisoning, herbicides).
- Socio-demographic factors as well as the type of species targeted by control measures appear to influence the level of policy support. In particular, men and older people are more in favour of control.
- Respondents with prior knowledge of control or eradication projects show a higher level of support.

The authors observe that the public generally supports wildlife preservation, while knowledge and understanding of alien species management programmes often remain poor. They therefore suggest that reassuring and informing the public must become a priority in order to increase public support for invasive non-native species management projects. This conclusion is in line with the recommendations made in the recent Commission study "Scope options for EU action on invasive alien species"² which suggests promoting awareness of the invasive species issue in Europe (e.g. through publications, the DG-Environment website, supporting further research projects in this area, funding of a coordinated and focused awareness campaign, through synergies with Countdown 2010 programme, etc).

¹For more information, see the complete document on the European Council Website, available at:

http://www.coe.int/t/e/cultural_co-operation/environment/nature_and_biological_diversity/nature_protection/sc23_tpvs07erev.pdf

²More information is available at http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/invasivealien/docs/2006_06_ias_scope_options.pdf

Source: Bremner A. and Park K. (2007) "Public attitudes to the management of invasive non-native species in Scotland", Biological Conservation 139: 306-314.

Contact: abremner70@yahoo.co.uk

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