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Invasive species management is people management

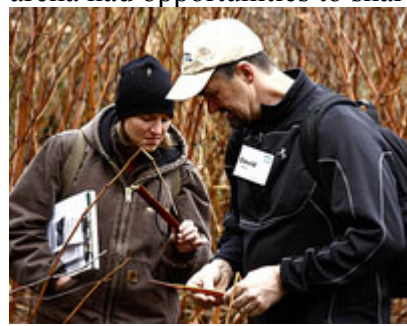
Marie Zhuikov, Budgeteer News Published Tuesday, December 23, 2008

More than 430 people interested in aliens gathered in Duluth just before Halloween. The aliens they were studying weren't the extra-terrestrial kind, but the terrestrial and aquatic kinds — either found in Minnesota or on their way. They gathered as part of the Minnesota Invasive Species Conference 2008 in the first event of its kind to explore the impacts of these species found in Minnesota's lands and waters.



Staff from Minnesota Sea Grant and the Minnesota chapter of the Soil and Water Conservation Society co-chaired the conference, which was hosted by the Minnesota Invasive Species Advisory Council (MISAC).

“Combining aquatic and terrestrial invasive species interests at this conference made sense because the approaches to management are similar,” said Doug Jensen, Minnesota Sea Grant aquatic invasive species program coordinator and conference co-chair. “People from each arena had opportunities to share their experiences, tools and lessons learned.”



Two workshop participants check out a strand of invasive Japanese knotweed in Hartley Park in Duluth. Image courtesy Laramie Carlson

“We emphasized the key species that affect Minnesota,” said Rick Bale of the Bay Lake Improvement Association. “The public plays a crucial role in preventing the spread of invasive species and in preventing future infestations.”

The conference began with workshops designed to (and titled) “Close the Door on Invasive Species.” More than 80 cabin, woodland and lakeshore owners — plus land managers, service providers, educators, students and other professionals — learned about management and prevention measures to protect resources from invasive species.

Workshop plenary speakers sharing their viewpoints included Luke Skinner of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Terry Christian with Minnesota Waters. Jana Goerd, a Duluth News Tribune reporter, described her continuing battle against spotted knapweed.

The workshops were followed by two days of technical presentations by 120 speakers, including a well-attended symposium focused on managing ballast water's capacity for ushering invasive species by commercial shipping around the world and throughout the Great Lakes. The Great Lakes shipping industry has partnered to explore ways to contain the movement of invasive species through ballast water for years.

Young people participated in the conference through the Restore the Balance Youth Program poster and essay contest, hosted by the Great Lakes Aquarium.

Several students and their teachers attended a media briefing along with reporters and journalists. They heard Peter Sorensen, a University of Minnesota professor, discuss his research on common carp. Noting that although these invasive fish are despised by many Minnesotans, Sorensen believes they are “living, breathing, fascinating animals that could be an excellent model for testing invasion theory and fine-tuning integrated pest management.”

Cindy Hale, a research associate with the university's Natural Resources Research Institute, intrigued reporters when she explained that all of the terrestrial earthworms currently found in Minnesota are non-native. If Minnesota had indigenous earthworms, the scouring glaciers of

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the last Ice Age eliminated them. She described how earthworm activity changes forests and reiterated that people are the primary vector for spreading this harmful invader.

Conference plenary speakers featured people with regional to local viewpoints such as Miles Falk with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. Minnesota State Senator Dennis Ozment stressed the need to educate local elected officials about the situation.

Peter Shutrop explained the role of county agricultural inspectors, and Ken Grob described efforts by the Hubbard County Coalition of Lake Associations to raise awareness about aquatic invasive species.

Closing plenary speaker Steve Bortone, director of Minnesota Sea Grant, offered a “big picture” perspective on invasives by discussing how people have moved species around for centuries.

The conference concluded with tours of research facilities and field trips.

MISAC plans to host another conference in the future and will use results from evaluations to guide content. Judging from the following results, participants found the event useful:

- Ninety-six percent of respondents thought the conference achieved its goals;
- Ninety-six percent gained an understanding of invasive species issues;
- Ninety-eight percent of workshop participants who responded and 93 percent of conference respondents plan to implement the knowledge they gained — and dozens provided specific examples.

The conference’s resounding message continues to reverberate throughout the state: Effective invasive species management requires people management.

Written by Marie Zhuikov, communications coordinator, and Sharon Moen, science writer, with the Minnesota Sea Grant Program at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

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