

Congress can act now to prevent costly invasions of non-native species and diseases

New screening procedures will close the loophole that allowed harmful invasive species like **Asian carp**, **Burmese pythons**, and **nutria** to enter the country

Strengthening U.S. Regulation of Live Animal Imports

The Lacey Act, the current law governing animal imports, gives the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) limited power to declare species “injurious” and prohibit their importation to the United States. This approach, adopted 111 years ago, is excruciatingly slow—the average listing time is now about four years, and only about 40 animal groups total have been listed. Experts repeatedly say this law is ineffective. Congress can save taxpayers millions a year in damages and control costs by strengthening the Lacey Act to prevent the introduction of non-native wildlife species that pose excessive risk to the economy, the environment, human health or native wildlife. The Lacey Act should be improved to empower the FWS to first assess the potential risks associated with a species proposed for import before deciding whether to allow or prohibit its trade into the country. Modernizing the Lacey Act will be one of the most important U.S. policy advances ever toward blocking imports of harmful invasive species.

Consequences of a Poorly Regulated International Trade

For far too long the pet, aquarium and other industries have freely imported live animals, many carrying dangerous diseases, to the United States. As a leading import market, the United States receives hundreds of millions of these animals each year. Inevitably, some of them end up on our lands and in our waters—escaped from captivity or dumped by those who no longer want them. Many of these non-native animals survive temporarily and die out. But others, unconstrained by the natural limiting factors of their native environments, flourish and cause serious environmental, health and economic problems.

Some examples...

Burmese pythons, imported from Southeast Asia as pets and then illegally released in the wild, are reproducing and thriving in the Everglades and other south Florida wetlands. Estimated at 30,000 in number, the snake is considered both a threat to the restoration of the Everglades and to human safety, with the state working to control and eradicate the population.¹



Asian carp, at first confined to southeastern waterways and aquaculture ponds they were imported to clean, are now thriving in the Mississippi River basin, with only an electric barrier to keep these giant fish out of the Great Lakes, where their damaging spread is likely to be unstoppable. The federal government spent in 2010 alone \$79 million trying to prevent their invasion of the Great Lakes.²



Indian mongooses, brought to Hawaii and Puerto Rico to control rats and snakes in sugarcane fields, became a menace, damaging banana and papaya crops and carrying infectious diseases, and are to blame for the listing of many birds, turtles, lizards and rabbits on the endangered species list worldwide. They are responsible for approximately \$50 million annually in damages in Hawaii and Puerto Rico alone.³



Harmful Non-Native Animals Wreak Havoc on Ecosystems, Health, and Government Budgets

Some non-native species that were imported and escaped into the U.S. have become invasive, dominating natural habitats and threatening biodiversity. Invasive animals are a common factor in federal endangered and threatened species listings. Not only can these non-natives spread widely, out-compete and eat our native wildlife and fundamentally alter natural systems, they can also carry infectious pathogens and harmful parasites. Diseases brought to the United States via imported wild animals include exotic Newcastle's disease, heartwater, malignant catarrhal fever, monkeypox, rabbit viral hemorrhagic disease, chytridiomycosis and ranavirus. Invasive species are rarely eradicated, so the economic damage and cost of ongoing control efforts are borne by taxpayers, states and the federal government – a clear example of the old adage “penny wise and pound foolish.” Preventing the import of invasive species will pay for itself many times over.

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REFERENCES

Unless otherwise cited, the information contained in this fact sheet is excerpted from *Broken Screens: The Regulation of Live Animal Imports in the United States*, a Defenders of Wildlife publication that identified the scope of the trade, risks and current regulations, and recommendations for improvement. The full report and other information are available at www.defenders.org/animalimports.

- 1 University of Florida: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw286>
- 2 “Stopping the Invasion of Asian Carp: An Action Agenda for Congress” Great Lakes Commission. February 2010
- 3 “Introduced Species Summary Project,” Columbia University
- 4 U.S. Geological Survey:
http://fl.biology.usgs.gov/Snakehead_circ_1251/html/risk_assessment_process.html
- 5 “Alien Species Invasion: The Deep Economic Impact,” March 25, 2010, Financial edge, Investopedia.com

Chinese snakeheads, imported for the specialty food market, are turning up in American rivers, such as the Potomac River, where they compete with native species for food and threaten the balance of these ecosystems.



Eradication of snakeheads from just one small pond in Maryland cost over \$100,000,⁴ a process which quickly became both physically and fiscally too costly to continue as the snakehead invasion spread through connected waterways.

Red lionfish, from the Indo-Pacific and introduced to the Atlantic Ocean as aquarium escapees, have formed large populations from Florida to as far north as New York. They have now invaded the Gulf of Mexico along the coasts of Florida and Louisiana down to Mexico. These venomous fish are aggressive predators of shrimp and other native commercial species such as snapper and grouper.



Gambian giant pouched rats, pet trade imports from Africa, carried the highly contagious and potentially fatal monkeypox virus to the United States in 2003, resulting in an outbreak that sickened 71 people in six states.



Nutria, rat-like, semi-aquatic rodents imported to Louisiana in 1930 for their valuable fur, thrived and reproduced in massive numbers, and are now destroying aquatic vegetation, overrunning and eroding wetlands, and pushing out native animals. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries estimates that 20,300 acres of wetlands are impacted by nutria, and the control program will cost the state a total of \$65.7 million dollars. Nutria also are causing problems in Oregon, Washington, Virginia and Maryland.⁵



National Environmental Coalition on Invasive Species

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