



“Currents” February 2020

Don't Let Your Pets Become Pests

Non-native plants and animals can have devastating impacts on our pristine waterways and hill country environment. We've experienced this problem locally through increased water pollution in areas with flocks of domestic ducks and Egyptian geese. Originally, these birds may have been pets or ornamental waterfowl, but their release or escape to public waterways has led to permanent populations and elevated bacteria levels in the river where the flocks gather. Often with good intentions, humans have been transporting plants and animals from one region to another for thousands of years. Historically, explorers brought novel specimens back to their countries and settlers often traveled with plants or animals from home to serve as familiar elements in a new land. Additionally, plants and animals have accidentally traveled to new areas either by hitching a ride or in the case of the sea lamprey, by traveling through manmade shipping canals. Starting in the 1800s, this invasive species traveled from the Atlantic Ocean throughout the Great Lakes and quickly devastated the once vibrant fishing industry by killing native fish through parasitism. Non-native species will thrive and spread throughout a new area because of abundant food, favorable habitat, and lack of natural predators. When this happens, the plant or animal can wreak havoc on the ecology of its new environment.

Another example of a destructive invasive species is the Burmese python in south Florida. The exotic snake arrived in the United States through the pet trade and wild populations have become established from animals that escaped or were intentionally released. Growing up to 26 feet in length and with few predators, the snakes are dominating the food chain in the Everglades and have drastically reduced the populations of once common mammals like rabbits, raccoons, and opossums.

Texas is home to several invasive plants and animals including giant cane, feral hogs, zebra mussels, suckermouth catfish, nutria, and fire ants. Each of these species cause changes to the natural environment by consuming food needed by native species, damaging habitat, and quickly colonizing new areas. Among these, the suckermouth catfish is an example of an animal that was originally kept as an aquarium pet, but careless release by humans have resulted in permanent populations in the wild.

The suckermouth catfish (also called plecostomus or armored catfish) is popular because of its ability to clean algae from your fish tank. However, its voracious appetite is far less charming when released into a waterway because it can drastically reduce the amount of green plants, therefore knocking out the base of the food chain and affecting all other aquatic organisms. The San Marcos River (joins the Guadalupe River near Gonzales) is currently home to a growing population of suckermouth catfish and substantial efforts are underway to reduce the numbers. This exotic fish could pose a threat to the ecology of the upper Guadalupe River if a population becomes established. Currently, there are no known occurrences of suckermouth catfish in Kerr County, but exotic fish like koi and goldfish have been observed in our waterways.

Though it is illegal, each year unwanted exotic plants and animals are dumped and released into the environment where they can quickly become an invasive species. Possibly the owner couldn't take the animal with them when they moved, it grew larger than they anticipated, or the animal is unhealthy.

Whatever the reason, releasing any animal into local waterways can cause great harm to the environment, present a danger to people if the animal is aggressive, and it is ILLEGAL. UGRA encourages all pet owners to give serious consideration to care requirements and the long-term commitment of owning an exotic pet before purchasing it either online or in a pet store. However, if you are in a situation where you can no longer care for an animal, do not release it. Ask a local pet store to accept it, find someone to adopt it, or seek advice from an animal rescue organization. If these options are not available, please contact Kerr County Animal Services for assistance (830-257-3100).

Let's Keep Our River Clean

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