

When Household Pets Become Invasive Pests

Pet ownership is a big commitment and the duties of caring for a pet can quickly become overwhelming. When the responsibility becomes too much, some pet owners choose to release their pets into what they think is their natural habitat. However, many pets sold in pet stores are not native to Ontario and can cause havoc when released. These pets are considered invasive species to Ontario lands and waters.

The common goldfish, which can be bought at pet stores for as little as a dollar, can become a huge problem when released into local ponds. Goldfish are native to eastern Asia but are held in captivity as pets worldwide. When they are not limited by the size of an aquarium or the quantity of food, goldfish released into the wild can reach up to four pounds in weight and forty centimetres in length. Goldfish appear to thrive in disturbed ecosystems, and have the ability to compete for both habitat and food with native species, as they are a predator to many small fish. They also have the ability to repopulate rapidly and adapt to low levels of oxygen and cold water temperatures, which further displaces native species.

The red eared slider turtle is also considered an invasive species in Ontario ecosystems. The red eared slider is native to the southern U.S, but has been introduced to Ontario waterways through the release of unwanted pets. Red eared sliders are very aggressive and can displace native turtles, many of which are species at risk. Red eared sliders also have the ability to carry tropical diseases, and can spread these to native turtles who have no defense against the exotic pathogens.

Fish and invertebrates aren't the only releases which cause concern. When getting rid of an aquatic pet, many owners choose to dump the contents of their aquarium into local waterways. Aquatic plants used in aquariums include water soldier and water chestnut, both of which are invasive species to Ontario. So far, the only occurrence of water soldier in North America is in the Trent River, and it is a major cause for concern as it crowds out native plants and significantly reduces biodiversity.

Invasive species pose a growing threat to Ontario's biodiversity and cause millions of dollars in damage annually. If you have any questions about invasive species in Ontario or wish to report an invasive species in your area, please contact the Invading Species Hotline at 1-800-563-7711 or visit www.invadingspecies.com.

There are also ways to get involved in the removal of invasive plants with organizations like Ontario's Invading Species Awareness Program, Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunter, and your local conservation authority. I am enjoying the opportunity to spend my summer working as an Invasive Species Community Outreach Liaison with Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority (GRCA) and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH). Please contact me at the GRCA to learn how you can get involved: 905-885-8173.

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