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Foreign invaders threaten native Swiss species

Most invasive plants have entered Switzerland as ornamentals like Japanese knotweed.

From mountain meadows to riverbanks, scientists say a silent war between foreign species and native Swiss plants and animals is unfolding all around us.

A project at Bern University has allowed scientists for the first time to take a sweeping look at the types of plants and animals that have moved to Europe from far-flung places. Such an inventory, which relied on more than a hundred scientists and three years of collecting data, has never been done before on a continental level.

"The results are frightening," Wolfgang Nentwig, a professor at the Institute for Ecology and Evolution at Bern University, says. The report, called Delivering Alien Invasive Species Inventory for Europe (Daisie), found there are now more than 11,000 types of non-native plants and animals living in Europe. Many of them could have a significant impact on the environment and health.

"New species aren't an enrichment, they're a danger," Nentwig said. "Invasive species become more frequent and because space and resources are limited, someone else has to disappear. When invasive species take over, it leads to a McDonaldisation, where everything is the same."

The effects can already be felt in the spider world. Nentwig said a research assistant recently collected 50 spiders near the institute in the Swiss capital, but 45 of the spiders were the same – a small North American arachnid with grey markings called a dwarf spider.

"Fifteen years ago that spider didn't exist here," he said. The spiders reached Europe through United States military traffic into Germany, from where they have since spread into France and Switzerland.

In the plant realm, Switzerland has a growing issue with

giant hogweed, or cow parsley, a perennial from the Caucasus region with a dark reddish-purple stalk and spotted leaves, favoured by botanists and beekeepers. Since being introduced about 25 years ago, the plant has taken over riverbanks and roadsides all across Switzerland, crowding out native plants. The dangers extend beyond biodiversity though.

"If you get it on your skin and then are exposed to UV light, like from the sun, your skin will burn and blister," Nentwig said. "I mean burn. Not like a sunburn."

How Switzerland is faring is a bit difficult to say, as the area is drastically understudied, but it appears to be doing better than many other European countries because it is landlocked.

The Daisie Project found Switzerland has a total of 849 non-native species living within its borders, about the same as Portugal and Latvia.

Globalisation and increased trade between countries is one of the most effective vectors for introducing new species into ecosystems. For that reason, large industrial countries or those with bustling ports are particularly infested.

Britain tops the list with more than 3,000 introduced species.

For a long time the movement was from out of Europe to North America, Australia, and New Zealand and South Africa, but for years Europeans have grossly underestimated just how many non-native species live in Europe. Stricter quarantines for incoming goods need to be put into effect to make sure goods are free of insects, seeds and fungus.

Terrestrial plants make up the most common type of alien invaders, with 6,634 species detected across Europe. Land-based invertebrates follow a distant second, with 2,536 species.

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only brown mice*

Doctors "playing God with children's sex"

It's a boy! It's a girl! But what happens when life doesn't fit in with greeting cards and the defining moment of childbirth becomes a bewildering puzzle?

Swiss intersex activist Daniela Truffer is spearheading a campaign to stop genital surgery and hormone treatment on children born with indeterminate sexual organs.

Truffer argues that affected individuals should be given the time to grow up and decide for themselves whether they wish to become male or female or remain in-between.

"Forced surgery can not be the answer," she said, quoting medical studies that reveal poor outcomes and show that most patients suffer a lifetime of frustration and regret. "These surgeries are painful and irreversible and likely to reduce or remove sexual feelings."

A condition that is seen in one in 2,000 births, people born neither fully male nor fully female have been an acknowledged part of society since Antiquity. But over time they became an invisible minority, particularly since corrective surgical intervention became the norm in the 20th century.

Doctors and parents are acting under the cultural imperative that when elements of both sexes are present in a child, one sex has to be chosen over the other without delay. Many doctors still adhere to the general view that a child needs a clear-cut biological appearance. The question is not whether to operate but in what direction.

However, some hospitals have now renounced the scalpel to deal with intersex babies. Chromosome tests are carried out on infants of unclear sex. Regardless of the results parents are advised to wait until their child can choose a gender itself.

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