



ARTICLES

How Do Debates Surrounding Animal Welfare Intersect with Efforts to Control ‘Invasive Alien Species’?



Kedi Liu
Pompeu Fabra University



kediliu@yahoo.com



Copyright © 2024 (Kedi Liu).

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. Check.

Cómo citar este artículo: Liu, Kedi. 2024. “How do Debates Surrounding Animal Welfare Intersect with Efforts to Control ‘Invasive Alien Species’?”. *Animal Ethics Review* Vol. 4: e2024403. <https://doi.org/10.31009/aer.2024.v4.03>.

PHOTO: Photo by Magi Kern on Unsplash

Animal Ethics Review Vol. 4 (2024)
UPF- Centre for Animal Ethics
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
ISSN 2696-4643 / e2024403

Abstract

How would you define “invasive alien species”? Have you met any of these individuals? Do you understand their life experiences? There is an immensely intertwined linkage between ecology and language. Namely, “how humans treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and world-views” (Stibbe 2021, 2). Which are actively shaped and perpetuated by language. So what do we mean when we use the phrase “invasive alien species”? Languages and discourses have been exploited to perpetuate inequalities, hidden in our everyday communication “of unlimited economic growth as the main goal of society” (Stibbe 2021, 3). Theorised by critical discourse analyst Teun Van Dijk (2006, 139), ideologies are often “mapped onto discourse”, typically “expressed in terms of their own underlying structures”, such as the frequent use of “us” and “the others”. This paper is guided by the perspective of critical animal and media studies, which insists the vitalness of revelation of how nonhuman animals are communicated. It explores the phenomena of “invasive species management” from three areas: (i) discourse-adaptation which helps to justify this on-going act; (ii) the main beneficiaries of such conduct; and (iii) ethical concerns for such human intervention. The aim is to investigate the justified cruelty that is majorly overlooked, and purposely hidden by mainstream information sources, searching for a fuller picture of the reality of “invasive species management”.



Keywords

Invasive alien species, invasive species management, critical animal studies, animal ethics, critical discourse analysis, ideology.

1. Introduction

How would you define “invasive alien species”? Have you met any of these individuals? Do you understand their life experiences? There is an immensely intertwined linkage between ecology and language. Namely, “how humans treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and world-views” (Stibbe 2021, 2). Which are actively shaped and perpetuated by language. So what do we mean when we use the phrase “invasive alien species”? Languages and discourses have been exploited to perpetuate inequalities, hidden in our everyday communication “of unlimited economic growth as the main goal of society” (Stibbe 2021, 3). Theorised by critical discourse analyst Teun Van Dijk (2006, 139), ideologies are often “mapped onto discourse”, typically “expressed in terms of their own underlying structures”, such as the frequent use of “us” and “the others”. This paper is guided by the perspective of Critical Animal and Media Studies (CAMS), which insists the vitalness of revelation of how nonhuman animals are communicated.

According to Kumschick et al. (2015): “The human-mediated translocation of species to regions outside their native ranges is one of the most distinguishing features of the Anthropocene”. However, the “human-mediated” detail is often uncoincidentally missed out by mainstream discourses, directly linking unwanted consequences, largely caused by humans, with animals deemed as “alien” and “invasive” — creating an illusion that these animals are directly responsible for unfavoured results.

Steady growth of the human population, and the perpetual need for economic gains, human society is tremendously reliant on the extraction of natural resources, and ecological changes across the globe are becoming increasingly noticeable. With this, demands for managing and re-establishing territories and species that are living within also grow. “Invasive species management” appears in environmental policy and practice in many shapes and forms, including introductions of non-native species to a new location, or the complete opposite, controlling or extinguishing new arrivals, mitigating the impacts of established populations, and more (Simberloff, 2013). Whilst this may sound like another specific type of work that should only concern the specialists and that it is all for the betterment of population harmony amongst species, many of these actions justified in the name of “invasive species management” are in fact incredibly vicious, deceitful, and deadly. Supported by the credence that human needs take priority above all other beings, hunting, trapping, poisoning, exterminating, and more can be fluently done for the sake of property and land protection, (human) public safety and health, and in defence of domesticated animals. Not only are these practices claimed to be a response to non-human animals “intruding” on human comfort zones; humans are constantly taking proactive intrusive actions such as creating new food sources, and occupying and changing habitats. However, humans blatantly have the authority to create a double standard. Amongst many other detrimental effects of such management are also the effects on non-targeted species and the ecosystem — albeit, this will not be explored further in this study.

This paper explores the phenomena of “invasive species management” from three areas: (i) discourse-adaptation which helps to justify this on-going act; (ii) the main beneficiaries of such conduct; and (iii) ethical concerns for such human intervention. The aim is to investigate the justified cruelty that is majorly overlooked, and purposely hidden by mainstream information sources, searching for a fuller picture of the reality of “invasive species management”.

2. Discourse

In this section, the language surrounding “invasive alien species” is briefly explored and studied.

A widely accepted and cited definition for “invasive alien species” is resonated by the US National Invasive Species Management Plan (US Department of the Interior 2016) as “a species that is non-native to the ecosystem under consideration and whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health” (National Invasive Species Information Center 1999). Whilst, “invasion” simply suggests “the uncontrolled or unintended spread of an organism outside its native range” (Saunders 2016, 118). The language used to talk about these living, feeling creatures is of objectification, licensing the act of absolute designation and management of the object. Though it is recognised by many including Saunders (2016) that “determining the negative impact of invasive alien species depends on both objective scientific evidence and subjective value definitions of impact” (118). “Invasive” and “negative impact” seem like two inseparable labels, if either one is identified then the other must also be true; secondly, “science” here is assumed to be absolutely ultimate and objective, failing to point out that science also possesses subjectivity; thirdly, the “subject value” here doesn’t imply to include any subjective values outside of the spectrum of negative impact of an invasive species.

Some definitions show awareness of human responsibilities. For instance, Russel and Blackburn state that, alien species are those whose “presence in a region is attributable to human actions that have enabled them to overcome barriers to their natural dispersal” (2017, 312). They also add that alien species’ impact on the ecosystem could be positive and negative; invasive species are considered a “subset of alien species that are determined overall to have negative impacts” (Russel and Blackburn 2017, 312).

“Invasion of alien species” has been proclaimed internationally as one of the top five “direct drivers of change in nature with the largest global impact” amongst “changes in land and sea use, direct exploitation of organisms, climate change, and pollution” (Convention on Biological Diversity 2022). The so-called non-native species continue to be blamed for losses of biodiversity globally as well as economic losses and many more. For instance, £1.84 billion per year in the British economy is claimed to be forfeited due to the activities of invasive species (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2023). These individuals of other species are often portrayed as the ultimate embodiment of evil, with absolutely no benefits to offer. Their role of existence is solely to “disrupt habitats and ecosystems, prey on or out-compete native species, spread disease and interfere with the genetic integrity of native species” (Department for

Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2023). This belief has successfully infiltrated the minds of many, assuming an added layer of detriment and negativity to “impacts caused by alien species on biodiversity and human livelihoods” (Essl et. al. 2020, 4882). Therefore, this leads to the justification of human intervention to control “invasive predators”, and this interference is believed to be one of the most vital ways for the conservation of *more valued* species. This chronically implies that *designated* invasive predators/species are the biggest enemies to protected species, the environment, human benefits, and not human ourselves as the main cause of the depredations. Implementations tackling the negative impacts of invasive alien species on biodiversity, agricultural productivity and human health are widely recognised and in action (Kumschick et al. 2015). This is achieved by a range of preventative to defensive guidelines and regulations across international bodies such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, World Health Organisation, World Organisation for Animal Health and International Union for Conservation of Nature and more (Kumschick et al. 2015). Though Glen et al. (2017) regretfully and apologetically point out that, if it weren't for the robust barriers of logistical, economic, and social challenges, an even larger scale of species “invasion” would happen unstoppably.

Current ecological thinking assumes that nature is static, and humans have the authority to modify it when it acts otherwise. Ken Thompson (2014) condemns the “native-good, alien-bad” philosophy, as well as questioning the very outline of “native” and “alien”. Thompson argues that no species is designed or can be re-designed to be stagnant, and poses the questions that to what point in time can we mark the origin of one species, and to where the borders can be drawn to call one an alien. Souther echoes that migration happens incessantly, just like “the relationship between human activity and the environment”, it is not stagnant, and the “rate and scale of transformation is variable and comparative” (2016, 77). In turn, Thompson (2014) urges for less human intervention and argues for letting the ecosystem recover and adapt to the movements of living creatures on its own.

It must be comprehended that discourse can create gaps and distance between controlled species and human beings. When this gap is too vast, the blame for the results of the Anthropocene can be easily shifted onto nonhuman others. Such discourses disassociate human beings from all the manmade changes in ecology, such as distribution and usage of resources and animal inhabitants; disregard the increase in human population and movements; conceal the responsibilities of the continuation of extractive and exploitative industrialisation and large-scale farming (Mukerjee 1942, 1); and neglect the sentience of each individual criminalised animal. Don't they harm the environment, human health, and the economy of less-valued societies? This creates an illusion that trade, infrastructure, and tourism driven by humans are not acts of invasion in themselves and are not providing opportunities for “invasion” by individuals of other species.

3. Beneficiary

Following the previous section on discourses, this segment will ask the question why, why is it important to criminalise these supposed “invasive alien species”? For whose advance?

From the few reflective definitions cited above, it is not hard to notice that the main aspects concerned within these discourses are human-centred. “Invasive alien species” are claimed to harm the economy, environment, as well as human health, all of which are based on the benefits to human societies. Saunders reminds us that certain councils and committees also add and recognise that “many alien species are non-invasive and support human livelihoods or a preferred quality of life” (2016, 115). This confirms that the *invasiveness* of an (alien) species depends very much on how supportive and beneficial it is to human livelihoods, and human’s preferred quality of life. The US National Invasive Species Management Plan indicates that council and committee branches should “focus on non-native organisms known to cause or likely to cause negative impacts and that do not provide an equivalent or greater benefit to society” (Saunders 2016, 118). Here, it is explicitly stated that species that “do not provide” benefits to (human) society are targeted to be controlled, which most of the time is lethal. Statements like this assume human superiority and confine living creatures into *beneficial to human beings* and *non-beneficial to human beings*.

Accusations such as “various abundant invasive species have had severe economic impacts on US industries and the natural environment” (Saunders 2016, 6), measure the value of a species based on whether this species can bring profits to the industry. The need for humans to benefit is strongly evident, and this need must be constantly fulfilled without any tolerance for any restrictions.

Many defined “invasive alien species” have silently and compulsorily taken on the sole blame for “power outages; loss of farmland property value; contamination of grain; spread of disease; increases in operating costs; loss of irrigation water; collapse of buildings; competition with native plants; loss of spout, game or endangered species; and ecosystem disturbance” (Saunders 2016, 6). I argue that this kind of blame itself is a benefit to human society. They disguise the anthropocentric harm done to the environment, remove the responsibilities of all stated above from individual and collective human beings, and impose such burden and guilt upon scapegoats, which again, is to make humans feel kinder — at the cost of others’ sufferings and lives. Methods used to settle an “invasive alien species” population include but are not limited to “cultural controls, mechanical controls, baits and attractants, biological controls, chemical controls, and bounties — when someone is paid to catch and kill the target species” (Saunders 2016, 19). Uncompassionately, it is added that “the most effective, long-term way to manage pests is by using a combination of methods that work better together than separately” (Saunders 2016, 19).

4. Ethics

The final part of this essay will address the ethical concerns raised in the process of exploring the experiences of individuals of non-human species.

It shouldn't be difficult to detect that ethical concerns around the well-being of "invasive alien species" are terribly dormant, especially amongst policy makers. Nonetheless, scientific consensus on the negative impacts of "invasive alien species" is increasingly being challenged, and animal welfare is increasingly gaining attention. Souther alerts that although few international resolutions are drawn, lives of animals deemed "invasive" are not eligible "to protection under relevant welfare laws and standards" (2016, 69). Due to the newness of the field of animal law — only in the last four decades had this field gained much momentum —, this discipline is yet to grow in many of its domains, especially international law as a whole (Souther 2016). Well-being of individual creatures must receive greater attention, just like how we, humans, wish care upon ourselves. International communities must resign from their silence on the fact that non-native animals are subjected to cruel and inhumane deaths. Souther fiercely motivates and advocates for the cruciality of transnational measures and legislations as "animal protection transcends human-made geographical boundaries", and calls for the industrialized world to initiate and challenge cruel practices towards animals (2016, 100). No individual (from any species) should be excluded from moral consideration and rights to legal protections, and greater attentiveness in terms of violence and cruel suffering faced by non-native animals must be taken into account. Souther argues that each killing (controlling) method must be evaluated "based on the extent it induces prolonged suffering" (2016, 108). In order to recognise inhumane managements and controls, Souther clarifies the meaning of cruelty, as "any killing method that does not avoid unnecessary suffering due to the employment of ineffective killing techniques or practices should be considered to be unnecessarily" (2016, 107). She then reservedly adds that "a swift death is considered to be reasonably humane", without going to the full extent to argue for the wrongness of any killing (2016, 107). Here, I would like to argue that agony — regardless of its duration — is unjustifiably cruel because it could have been avoided by the use of another model of predator control.

Suffering is not the solution. Souther provides viable alternatives when faced with the overflowing of a species population that affects the well-being of others. Biological control — "especially immunocontraception targeting female fertility" can be traced back to the 1990s —, is an option conceivably less expensive, efficient, as well as humane (2016, 108). She goes on to argue that the dire situation in which many species find themselves needs to be addressed by a variety of disciplines. Animal rights lawyers should also develop and advance legal protections for all-inclusive species, as well as expand the "scope of the law with respect to these principles", forming a powerful protective framework for the welfare of these species (2016, 110).

It is time to ask ourselves, what and who are bearing the responsibilities of anthropocentric damages? Who is falling outside of our moral and legal protections? Why? Is it because of a given identity without their very own consent?

5. Conclusion

To conclude, “invasive alien species” are narrowly portrayed and standardised as one of the root causes of many (human) societal problems in the economic, environmental, and human health spheres. This largely accepted conjecture is unconvincingly evidenced from the very definition of the phrase. Thompson (2014) warns us that invasion scientists who study the impacts of alien species choose to look at the species that are “capable of achieving high abundance”, therefore through a lens that can easily justify their studies (135) and thus “ignoring the positive half of the balance sheet” (139). The deliberate suffering of all animals must be stopped and prohibited by law, starting with the discourses that society has become accustomed to using to justify it. No one should suffer for the benefit of another, and no one’s benefit should be based on the suffering of another. There are kinder and more ethical paths to take to achieve the same goal, perhaps with even more competent results, and we must begin to explore it.

In this ever-changing world we live in, with increasing environmental challenges and more, we need to build an inclusive network and ensure that we maximise the benefits for all. For all species, including humans, changes in the global trade network, climate, growing global tourism, etc. mean that the world will inevitably continue to experience movements, migrations and displacements as it has always done (Essl et al. 2020). How then do we define “native” and “alien”? Is it still important to generate such definitions? It is time to develop an adaptive plan that avoids harming one another in this eco-dependent life.



References

Convention On Biological Diversity. 2022. “Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework”. 18 December, UN Environment programme. <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/e6d3/cd1d/daf663719a03902a9b116c34/cop-15-l-25-en.pdf>.

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. 2023. “The Great Britain Invasive Non-Native Species Strategy”. <https://www.nonnativespecies.org/about/gb-strategy/>.

Essl, Franz, et al. 2020. “Drivers of Future Alien Species Impacts: An Expert-based Assessment.” *Global Change Biology* 26(9): 4880–4893. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.15199>.

Glen, Alistair S., et al. 2017. “Landholder Participation in Regional-Scale Control of Invasive Predators: An Adaptable Landscape Model.” *Biological Invasions* 19(1): 329–38.

Kumschick, Sabrina et al. 2015. "Ecological Impacts of Alien Species: Quantification, Scope, Caveats, and Recommendations." *BioScience* 65(1): 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biu193>.

Mukerjee, Radhakamal. 1942. "Mobility, Ecological and Social." *Social Forces* 21(2): 154–59.

National Invasive Species Information Center. 1999. "Executive Order 13112 - Invasive Species". U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2 March. <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/executive-order-13112>.

Russell, James C., and Tim M. Blackburn. 2017. "Invasive Alien Species: Denialism, Disagreement, Definitions, and Dialogue." *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 32(5): 312–14.

Saunders, Jeannie ed. 2016. "Invasive Species Management: Control Options, Congressional Issues and Major Laws. New York: Nova Publishers.

Simberloff, Daniel. 2013. "Biological Invasions: Prospects for Slowing a Major Global Change". *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene* 1: 000008. <https://doi.org/10.12952/journal.elementa.000008>.

Souther, Carly Elizabeth. 2016. "The cruel culture of conservation country: Non-native animals and the consequences of predator-free New Zealand." *Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems* 26(1): 63+.

Stibbe, Arran. 2021. *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*. New York: Routledge.

Thompson, Ken. 2014. *Where Do Camels Belong?* London: Profile Books.

US Department of the Interior. 2016. "National Invasive Species Management Plan". U.S. Department of the Interior <https://www.doi.gov/invasivespecies/management-plan>.

Van Dijk, Teun A. "Ideology and Discourse Analysis." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 115–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310600687908>.