

Alien species ? biodiversity?s ticking time bomb?

Title

They cause some 12.5 billion Euro worth of damage each year in the European Union alone. On 21 February BirdLife and IUCN co-hosted an event in the European Parliament in Brussels to shed some light on this ticking time bomb, ahead of the EU legislative proposal aimed at tackling the problem, which is expected in March.

More than 10,000 alien species have gained a foothold in Europe, from Asian tiger mosquitoes to North American ragweed, and at least 1,500 are known to be harmful. One of the better known examples of the economic damages caused by an Invasive Alien Species is the case of the American comb jelly fish in the Black Sea. The jelly fish arrived in the ballast water of ships from the American Atlantic coast. With no enemies in their new home, the jellies propagated at an alarming rate. The invasion contributed to the near collapse of Black Sea commercial fisheries within a few years and was a main contributor to the loss of 150 000 fishing jobs as a direct effect of the reduction of anchovies.

European Commissioner for the Environment, Janez Potočnik stated in his opening address that the root of the problem is related to the effects of globalisation with an increase in travel and trade around the globe. Most of the alien species arrive in our clothing, luggage and in freight. About 10-15% of all alien species in Europe are indeed invasive, meaning that they establish, spread and cause harm to the native biodiversity and also to human health and our ecosystem services. For example, the ragweed pollen cause severe allergy problems for a large part of the European population and the associated medical costs amount to hundreds of millions of euro. ?Invasive Alien Species know no boundaries?, the Commissioner stated and suggested that Europe needs guiding principles to solve the problem.

A coordinated action to limit the proliferation of these invasive species would be a first step. Considering the serious impact that the IAS have on Member States, a risk based approach is recommended. Europe should focus its efforts on prevention rather than reaction with bans on particular species, thus preventing them from entering the EU. Developing existing systems, such as border controls, would also be a way of maximising the efficiency of the legislation. Climate change was noted as having a major impact on how the situation will develop, not just in the future but right now, with certain species thriving in new areas of the globe because of increased temperatures and other beneficial conditions brought by climate change. Dr Paul Walton, Head of Habitats and Species at the RSPB said that ?despite the action taken, the problem is still getting worse and climate change only makes it easier for IAS to settle.? IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefevre closed the meeting by calling for a public awareness campaign ?making the public feel like citizen scientists?, meaning that people can

take action in their home town as they become aware of the damage caused by certain species, and learning about which they are.
