



Remarks by IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefèvre at the European Parliament Event “Biodiversity’s Ticking Time Bomb: Understanding and Addressing the Problem of Invasive Species in Europe”

21 February 2013, Brussels, Belgium

Opening remarks

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Invasive Alien Species may sound like creatures out of a science-fiction movie.

In reality, we live with them side by side, often unaware of the devastating impacts these invaders can have on our environment, our health and our economy.

Take, for example, the North American grey squirrel, which is wiping out the populations of its European red-coloured cousin and is costing the UK forestry sector some £10 million a year.

Or consider the American mink. They were initially imported to Europe for their prized furs, but are now inflicting millions of Euro worth of damage every year to muskrats, birds and domestic fowl. In Germany alone, the economic impacts caused by American mink are estimated to be €4.2 million a year.

A tiny parasite called *Gyrodactylus salaris* is decimating salmon populations and is expected to cost the Scottish Government £633 million and severely impact rural communities.

But the worst offender of them all – both in Europe and in the rest of the world – is the domestic cat! Cats were first domesticated in Egypt some 4,000 years ago and have since spread to all continents except for Antarctica. Today, they are responsible for destroying many native bird and reptile species, for example the highly endangered giant lizards in the Canary Islands.

Biological invasions have wreaked havoc to the environment around the world for centuries.

This is especially true for Europe where adventurers, explorers and collectors brought back many types of animals and plants from far-off lands – some of which became invasive in their new homes.

As early as 77AD, *Naturalis Historia* (The Natural History) manuscript mentions the severe problem posed by the invasion of rabbits in the Spanish Balearic Islands.

Islands are especially vulnerable to the impacts of invasive species. They are to blame for every second recorded extinction of wildlife species living on islands!

In the last sixty years, invasive species have become an even greater threat to biodiversity as globalization and trade, travel and tourism have made it easier for people – and the invasive animals and plants – to cross borders.

This is the unwanted side effect of the free movement of people and goods which is so characteristic of Europe and so dear to all of us Europeans.

Today, Europe hosts some 1,300 invasive species of the total of 11,000 alien species in Europe that we know about, , and the damage they cause is too high to ignore.

This is why the title of today's event – Biodiversity's Ticking Time Bomb – is no short of a thriller!

This afternoon we will discuss the extent of this problem, and what measures we can collectively take to face these opportunistic invaders.

In particular, we look forward to hearing about the European Commission's plans for a legislative instrument which we believe will be pivotal to reverse the current trends.

This is why IUCN has strongly supported the development of a dedicated EU policy instrument to combat invasive species in Europe, and -- not to forget! -- in the EU Overseas Territories.

Our scientists from the IUCN Invasive Species Specialist Group have provided valuable advice to guide EU policy development in this area, and we are ready to continue to do so.

An EU policy instrument on invasive species would directly support Target 5 of the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy on combating invasive alien species¹.

It will also further the implementation of an IUCN resolution that calls on our global membership, including the majority of EU Member States, to enforce stringent regulatory measures to prevent introduction of the most harmful invasive species.

But above all, the instrument must be implemented at the national level. As I mentioned before, because of the international nature of invasive alien species, inaction by a single Member State may put at risk the entire European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By joining forces, scientists, conservationists, policy makers, and national and local authorities can reverse the threats posed by invasive alien species in the European Union.

Coming back to the film genres, let us not look at the problem of invasives as a sci-fi story turned horror film.

Instead, let us work together to make it a blockbuster: a successful production involving numerous actors, with a hopefully happy ending!

¹ TARGET 5: Combat Invasive Alien Species: By 2020, Invasive Alien Species (IAS) and their pathways are identified and prioritised, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and pathways are managed to prevent the introduction and establishment of new IAS

Closing remarks

Thank you to all our speakers and the audience for a great discussion – I believe we have made excellent progress. Allow me to sum up the main points:

We have talked about the wide-ranging impacts of invasive species, and the fact that they affect our health and economic sectors such as forestry, shipping, agriculture and fisheries.

That's why we need strong and ambitious EU legislation to tackle invasive species.

It is more cost-efficient to do it now rather than later, as repairing the damage will cost us way more than solving the issue today with appropriate measure.

Inaction will cost the European Union some 12 billion Euros a year – and this is a conservative estimate! We also head that action, while not free, would cost a lot less – 40 to 100 million Euros a year.

A dedicated EU policy instrument should be able to prevent unwanted introductions, eradicate known invasive species when needed, and allow for quick response to new threats. Thus, the move from reaction to prevention was stressed throughout our session.

It is fundamental that it covers the entire European Union, including the EU overseas territories.

The legislation needs to be adopted at the EU level but, more importantly, it needs to be implemented at the national level.

And finally, policies alone are not sufficient. We also need to get better at communicating the problem of invasive species to the public, as we can all greatly contribute to averting the threat with very simple actions in our daily life.

I would like to conclude by thanking my colleagues at IUCN and BirdLife for organizing this event, the European Habitats Forum for its support.

And a very special thanks, once again, to MEP Pavel Poc for hosting us here at the European Parliament.