

The High Cost Of Invasive Species



An invasive species is any organism -- plant, animal, insect, or pathogen -- that is not native to an area or region. Invasives often have harmful negative effects on the environment and the economy. Invasive species are introduced accidentally or intentionally outside of their native range. With few, if any, natural competitors or predators, their populations easily expand.

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE REHABILITATORS SHOULD ADDRESS?

- The health of the individual?
- The health of the population?
- The health of the ecosystem?

Invasives can directly or indirectly kill our native wildlife and cause serious damage to the environment. They carry exotic diseases which can quickly kill large local populations of native species. Invasives also outcompete natives for food and nesting sites, and sometimes aggressively force natives out of their ideal habitat. Native wildlife has evolved over vast amounts of time, alongside their specific prey and predators. When foreign species are introduced, the established ecosystem is thrown out of balance.

In addition, many invasive species consume enormous amounts of water, thereby reducing the water supply for native wildlife, native vegetation, and humans. Invasives can change the physical characteristics of land and water, and can alter food chains. As habitat is destroyed by invasives, the native wildlife that depends on it disappears as well. In Colorado, control of aquatic invasive species alone costs \$4.5 million annually. In the U.S., the ecological damage from invasives coupled with the costs to control them total \$200 billion annually. These costs are only increasing.

As wildlife rehabilitators, we must make a choice. If a member of the public brings us an injured European Starling, what should we do?

Some rehabilitators provide care simply because of their concerns about negative publicity. Since many wildlife rehabilitation organizations depend on donations to keep the lights on, they contend that euthanizing a patient simply because it has been deemed “unworthy” of care would send a bad message to the public.

But as a rehabilitator, what is your true purpose? Are you a veterinary clinic, providing care to all animals, or a wildlife rehabilitator, providing care to wild animals with the goal of releasing them back into their native ecosystem? At the Rocky Mountain Wildlife Alliance, we are clear about how we manage sick or injured wildlife.

We believe that when an invasive species arrives for treatment, the most humane and ethical protocol for all parties is to euthanize or, in some rare instances, rehome the animal. Release back into the wild is never a consideration, and we strongly discourage it.

In addition, rehabilitators have enough trouble garnering respect from the more established wildlife professions without engaging in activities that undermine efforts to support native wildlife populations. For example, we cannot in good faith rehabilitate an invasive European Starling and a native American Kestrel and then release both, knowing that the intruder may well take over the kestrel’s nesting site. Invasives have been a key factor in the decline of the American Kestrel in many parts of their range over recent years.

Time and again, I hear rehabilitators say, “There are millions of starlings in this country. The few that I rehabilitate doesn't make a difference.” But I argue that, as a rehabilitator, if you believe you are not making a difference by rehabilitating and releasing an invasive animal, then the same must be true when you release a native animal.

So what is the true purpose of wildlife rehabilitation? If we are not making positive, appropriate choices regarding rehabilitation/release, then why do this work at all? Every animal we release makes a difference in some capacity. Investing our energy and resources in caring for and releasing only native species is not a choice that we wildlife rehabilitators get to make – it is our mission and our mandate.

At RMWA, we believe that the health of the ecosystem overrides all other factors to ensure a vigorous, balanced natural world.

WHAT IMPACTS DO INVASIVE SPECIES HAVE ON OUR ECOSYSTEM'S GENERAL ECONOMY?

- Damage lands and waters
- Compete for or prey on native wildlife
- Force native species out of ideal habitat
 - Compete for food and nesting sites
 - Threaten public health
- Damage or impair infrastructure