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RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP

It Takes a Whole Village

I'm sure many of you are familiar with, or at least heard of, the African proverb: "It takes a whole village to raise a child." This proverb suggests that child upbringing is a communal effort. That is, the responsibility for raising a child is shared with the extended family – everyone in the family participates, including the older children, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins. Even neighbors and friends will be involved in the upbringing of children who do not belong to them.

While the notion that it takes a village to raise a child has caused much controversy and debate, what's not debatable is the fact that it takes a village (i.e. everyone) to reduce the occurrence and further spread of exotic, invasive plants and the negative impacts that such species have on our native ecosystems. Homeowners, landowners, land-users, farmers, plant nurseries, habitat managers, conservation agencies, utility companies, transportation departments, etc. all have a shared – but unique – responsibility in protecting our native ecosystems. Financial and technical assistance programs administered by government agencies for exotic species control are not enough. Educational efforts by conservation organizations are not enough. Eradication efforts by stewardship-minded landowners are not enough to stop the spread of exotic plants. It takes everyone!

My primary responsibility at AWF is to provide wildlife habitat management and conservation technical assistance to private, non-industrial landowners. While I've had the privilege of working with landowners who have done well at eliminating exotic plants, others lack the desire to control exotic species. In fact, many landowners purposely introduce exotic species (e.g. sawtooth oak) in



Autumn olive spreading into a pine plantation.



Cogongrass in a hayfield.



Bamboo growing along a city street.



Mimosa retained in a lawn for aesthetics.



Giant reed growing in a ditch along a rural road.

the name of wildlife management. A quick note regarding plants and wildlife: **Native** wildlife requires **native** plants for reproduction and survival! And, as if things are not bad enough, many wildlife managers (both professional and non-professional) advocate the use of exotic plants in wildlife management. Intentional introductions and spread of exotic, invasive plants must cease...our natural heritage depends on it!

Travel down almost any rural road and you will likely see kudzu and wisteria claiming the canopies of native forests, and you don't have to go far to see cogongrass growing along highway right-of-ways and in hayfields. Travel down almost any unimproved, rural road and you will surely see Japanese climbing fern growing along the forest-road interface. What about giant reed? Is it coincidental that giant reed can be seen growing along guard rails, or is there a correlation between the two? And, if you haven't noticed it yet, Nandina, a very popular landscape plant, is showing up in forested habitats throughout Alabama.

Exotic plants don't just occur in rural areas. They occur in great abundance in municipalities everywhere. As I travel throughout the state I regularly observe vacant, residential lots dominated by mimosa and Chinese privet, and patches of urban wildlife habitat dominated by Chinese privet, mimosa, Chinaberry trees, and/or Chinese tallowtrees. Instead of providing urban residents with natural beauty and wildlife, these areas serve as sources for further spread. Bamboo can be found in city parks, neighborhoods, and nook and crannies everywhere in the urban landscape. Mimosa and Chinese tallowtrees, unfortunately, are common in lawns where they are used for shade and aesthetics.

Exotic, invasive plants are everywhere, and we all have a stake in reducing their spread and negative impacts. Certainly, a successful strategy to address invasive species issues will depend on the public's understanding and acceptance of actions needed to protect our valuable natural resources. Perhaps most importantly, is the public's adoption of a land ethic that is driven by a conviction of individual responsibility to protect our natural resources and to pass on a legacy of responsible stewardship.

