

FRIENDS OR FOE? INVASIVE SPECIES AND PUBLIC GREEN SPACE IN TORONTO

JENNIFER FOSTER and L. ANDERS SANDBERG

ABSTRACT. Environmentalists and ecologists typically regard invasive species as ecologically detrimental and undesirable. Although the ecological impacts of invasive species are well documented, less attention has been devoted to the sociocultural contexts guiding responses to species invasion. In this study the roles of invasive species are reconsidered through three prominent green spaces in Toronto, Canada: the Don Valley Brick Works, High Park, and the Leslie Street Spit. The case studies challenge popular negative assumptions about invasive species and suggest that they can serve important functions both for local ecosystems and for human communities. The case studies also provide lessons on the tension between and within different environmental imaginaries informing invasive species management. Invasives are often compatible with recreational interests, whereas naturalization efforts are ecologically sensitive and costly. Invasives can help restore human-made wastelands, and naturalization efforts often benefit wealthy rather than poor neighborhoods. *Keywords:* Canada, invasive species, public spaces, Toronto.

In the recently published *Nature by Design*, Eric Higgs wonders about future views of weedy and exotic species. He asks, “Will we be so overwhelmed by invasions on native flora and fauna that we will declare all-out war on such species, increasing the stringency of this one measure of ecosystem health? Or will we concede defeat to weeds and other flora and fauna, adopting a sophisticated control strategy that largely accepts them?” (2003, 124). We argue here that in urban settings intelligent action veers toward the latter, rejecting aggressive insurgency and purging tactics in favor of measured cohabitation. Three case studies from Toronto, Canada suggest that in some instances invasive species can serve useful functions, not only for local ecosystems but also for a broad community of people. These cases demonstrate the need in urban environments to learn to live with invasive species. They also reveal how even the most carefully planned and executed restoration work to control invasives may be hampered by careless human action. Embedded within these cases are lessons on and insights into the management of invasives in urban areas: the value of nonexpert knowledge and experience, the role of invasive biomass in fostering emergent native species associations on inhospitable sites, and how sociocultural differences in access to nature may play out through “restored” sites. These cases offer stimulating illustrations of the power of invasives to create and sustain urban ecological habitat.

Current conventional ecological wisdom interprets invasive species as “bad” and native species as “good” (Brown and Sax 2004). David Lodge and Kristin Shrader-Frechette define invasive species as “the subset of nonindigenous species that cause economic or environmental damage” (2003, 31). For the purposes of this article, we

✪ Ms. FOSTER is an assistant professor of environmental studies at York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3, where DR. SANDBERG is a professor of environmental studies.