I am a Hiker, Biker, Camper or Outdoor Enthusiast: Why should I care about invasive species?

Invasive plants can adversely affect our ability to enjoy natural areas. Plants such as ligustrums, kudzu, English ivy and Japanese stilt grass can grow over trails and campsites, making hiking and pitching tents difficult to impossible. Invasives can take over plant communities by shading out and displacing native wildflowers, trees and shrubs, thereby reducing the beauty and diversity of our native plant communities.

Invasive plants can make hiking, camping, and other outdoor activities unpleasant. Giant hogweed and wild parsnip sap on skin cause hyper-photosensitivity resulting in burns, blisters and skin discoloration. Spines on multiflora rose, exotic stinging nettle, invasive thistles and wine raspberry can scratch skin and tear clothing. If traveling by horse or mule, remember, some invasives such as beefsteak plant, can be poisonous to our four-legged companions.

Red imported fire ants originate in South America. As anyone from the Southern U.S. knows, they are extremely aggressive and have a powerful sting. Pustules that result from fire ant stings are irritating and can cause permanent scarring. Inadvertently disturbing a fire ant mound, by staking a tent or stepping on it, can be a very unpleasant experience for the unwary. Curious dogs and other four legged human companions can easily become covered with stinging fire ants.
Feral hogs can cause a wide variety of problems for outdoor enthusiasts. Hogs are omnivores and will eat almost anything, including food that you leave unattended. Hogs are wallowers and rooters. These activities destroy the natural beauty of trails and camping sites. Feral hogs can also spread brucellosis to humans and livestock. While symptoms of a mild case of brucellosis can resemble the flu, severe infections can affect the central nervous system and the lining of the heart. Currently no brucellosis vaccine is available for humans. Feral hogs have been known to attack people and can cause serious injury or death.

West Nile virus was first detected in the United States in 1999 and is spread by infected Asian tiger mosquitoes. People that spend time around lakes, ponds or other areas with high levels of mosquitoes could be at risk of contracting this virus. Symptoms of West Nile virus usually range from mild and flu-like to no symptoms at all. However, if the virus enters the brain or spinal cord, swelling and death can result. There are still no specific vaccines or treatments available for the virus, as of 2013.

What can hikers, bikers, campers and outdoor enthusiasts do to help prevent the spread of invasive species?

- To avoid spreading seeds from invasive plants, learn to recognize infestations and avoid passing through them.
- Clean equipment, boots, animals and gear between trips, and before leaving an infested area. Make sure to remove all seeds and other plant parts.
- Report any invasive sightings to the local land manager and to EDDMapS.org.
- Always use weed-free hay and feed for your animals.
- Never move firewood. Instead, buy or use firewood close to your campsite.
