

Exotic Animals and the Problems They Cause

When I used the term “exotic animals” most people are probably thinking about all of the exotic ungulates that one sees on Hill Country ranches, the sika, fallow, axis, aoudad, blackbucks, and maybe another 200 species of African and Asian origin. These animals are certainly the largest, most obvious examples.

Once these ungulates are on a ranch, they are not considered to be “wildlife”, but are “livestock” and the property of the ranch owner, just like all other livestock. In fact, the cattle, horses, sheep and goats we have now were at one time, several centuries ago, “exotic “animals imported from Europe and the Mid-East.

So adding yet another species, say an axis deer, to the mix of livestock does not, in theory, change the conditions on the ranch. That is: IF they are not stocked beyond the carrying capacity for grazers and browsers, IF the ranches were devoid of native white-tailed deer, and IF the exotics did not escape to become feral. But these are big “ifs”, especially in the case of the animals escaping ranches and becoming feral.

But wherever these ungulates compete with our white-tailed deer for forage, with our livestock for grazing, or come onto other people’s properties and overbrowse or overgraze these properties, then we have a problem.

And if instead of some of the exotic ungulates, it is feral hogs that come onto your property, destroying riparian areas, crops, lawns, gardens, fences, and just about anything else they want, then the problem of these feral animals is even a greater problem.

And then of course, there are the millions of feral cats that prey on our songbirds and spread diseases such as rabies.

The major problems with all of these animals is that they represent new species added to the ecosystem, which disrupts the long-standing balance of predator-prey and consumer-producer relationships in existence for thousands of years before humans arrived here. And those species that become feral, or free-ranging, and thus are not in the control of humans, are by far the worst offenders.

When the movements, actions and populations of feral animals are uncontrolled, and no natural limit on their population exists, other than depletion of their food source, real damage to the ecosystem occurs. Sometimes, I think it is easier to see the damage caused by invasive exotic plants, as when a tree becomes covered with kudzu, or a field becomes covered with thistles, or a creek becomes choked with *Arundo donax*, than to see the effects of feral animals on the landscape.

And of course, the exotic mammals mentioned above are not by any means the only types of exotic species that are causing us problems. Here are a few of the others: Africanized honeybees, apple snail, Asian tiger mosquito, Asian carp, Asian clam, brown tree snake, English sparrows, Eurasian collared dove, European starlings, fire

ants, Formosan termite, German cockroach, house mouse, Norway rat, nutria, and zebra mussel.

The environmental damage caused by the introduction, accidental or intentional, of exotic animal species is considerable, and, when exotic plants are included in the list, exotic species introduction is the second leading cause of species extinction worldwide. (Second only to habitat destruction for “development”).

And it is not just the environmental damage that these exotic species cause, there is also a huge monetary cost, both governmental and individual, to combating, controlling and attempting to eliminate these invasive species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Dept. estimates the costs to be \$120 billion PER YEAR.

It would of course have been much better and cheaper to have been able to prevent the introduction of these exotic species in the first place, but in the past we didn't know which of the introduced species would become feral and/or invasive, and we still can not always correctly predict which species will and which will not become a problem. And it is only after-the-fact that we have laws to prevent the importation of known invasive species.

And many species were accidentally introduced, or actually smuggled into the country.

So when it comes right down to it, about the best we can do is to try to identify problem species as early as possible and to take action to control and/or eliminate the problem when it is in its early stages. And we can try to educate people to not buy, introduce, or allow to propagate, any exotic species on their property.

Until next time.

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