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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**EPPO-Council of Europe workshop
“Communicating Invasive Alien Species”**

Oeiras, Portugal, 8-10 October 2013

COMMUNICATION ON IAS ISSUES TO MEDIA

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“Onde a terra se acaba e o mar começa”
 “Where the land ends and the sea begins”
 Luís de Camões in *Os Lusíadas*, Canto III

The largest of the continents, the euro asiatic, ends just a few miles from the venue of this conference. In a promontory that seems to rip the Atlantic Ocean, the *Promontorium Magnum* of the roman times, a point the Portuguese call Cabo da Roca. It is the most westernmost extent of continental Europe, there where the vast land mass stretching from the Bering Strait ends.

In crevices of granitic rocks and basalt that form the mass of igneous rocks around the Cabo da Roca flourishes, every spring, a small plant that we cannot find in any other part of the world. In the ridges beaten by the winds surrounding the lighthouse you can find, covered by small white balls, the inflorescence that characterizes this small plant, one we know by cravo-romano (roman-carnation). Its scientific name is *Armeria pseudoarmeria* and it is one endemism of the Lisbon area, a small botanical gem that is in danger of disappearing. It's a relative of the "sea pinks" we can find in the Mediterranean coastlines.

From the house where I live one can see where the cravo-romano flowers so I got used to see where I put my feet when walking through the coastline area . I was also able to understand who is the main enemy of this little thrift. It's another botanical species, one with fleshy leaves and showy flowers, that, year after year, progresses through those hills and valleys, occupying the lands that were supposed to belong to the roman-carnation. A plant known as chorão-das-praias (Hottentot Fig, the ice plant) or *Carpobrotus edulis*.



The photograph shows all the drama of this fight. The fragile carnation flower barely emerging from the ground fully covered by the fleshy leaves of the ice plant. This is a typical alien invasive species. Brought from South Africa to adorn gardens and help control the coastal sand dunes, it went out of control and, like it is illustrated here, aggressively invaded delicate habitats, ending up expelling its native plants.

Ice plants grow all year round, with individual shoot segments growing more than 3 ft (1 m) per year and one single plant can grow to at least 165 ft (50 m) in diameter. In the process, it forms vast monospecific zones, lowering biodiversity, and competing directly with several threatened or endangered plant species for nutrients, water, light and space.



first is an invasive species, and the second is a precious relic that carries a unique genetic heritage that cannot be replaced?

Now think for a moment about what drives journalists and the public opinion, especially in a country like Portugal, where the media priorities are currently focused in the political and economic crisis. Journalists are constantly on the lookout for signs of crisis everywhere, ending up bringing that reading to almost every situation. Today news is what fits the narrative of the crises, everything else ends up being disregarded. This naturally influences the "agenda setting" for almost all areas, especially those relating to scientific, cultural or environmental news.

If we look more closely into the way information is prioritised in areas such as sciences and environment, we will end up realizing that themes related to biodiversity and invasive species are the least mentioned. This because it's easier, and somehow sexier, to treat areas such as global warming, renewable energy or genetically modified organisms (this areas also benefit from the very efficient organization of lobbies). And this often happens because in those cases its easier to find a villain. The major emitters of CO2. The nuclear industry. A conglomerate giant like Monsanto. The journalism world tends to accentuate this part of human nature that leads us to prefer situations where there is a clear separation between good and evil, between friends and foes. And, why not, between the good plant and the bad plant.

Let me give you a Portuguese typical example. In our country there are huge plantations of *Eucalyptus globulus* - a species imported from Australia -, feeding an industry of pulp and paper that is now ranked second in national exportations. The growing presence of eucalyptus plantations, a species not indigenous but usually not classified as invasive, is regularly challenged and focus of violent criticism. However the alien species whose expansion poses greater problems for our natural forest ecosystems and might even jeopardize the future of forestry for industrial purposes, several species of the genus *Acacia*, rarely deserve media attention. Species like *Acacia dealbata*, *A. melanoxylon* or *A. longifolia* are not only extremely invasive in Portugal but also very difficult to eradicate from the areas they already reach.

The way the press treats the Portuguese forest is, moreover, a good example of how difficult is it to mobilize the attention of the journalist for these themes. In Portugal the forest occupies more than one third of the territory and sustain important industries. However, the overwhelming majority of the news focuses on one problem only: the fires that keep on ravaging tens of thousands of acres of woods and forests every summer. I will not go into detail about how journalists report those fires, but it is easy to find that same pattern of good and bad. The bad guys are the arsonists and those who do business out of burned forests; the good guys are the firefighters. Not much more is reported, apart from that struggle between these two forces.

Because I was there, I can give you another good example of journalistic distraction regarding our forests. Last year I was part of a jury to award a prize to the best journalistic piece on Portuguese forests. Only four works where submitted to the judges. Four, not one more. Fortunately the one that won was about a problem

related to an invasive species: the pinewood nematode, *Bursaphelenchus xylophilus*, that is decimating the Portuguese forest silently and ruthlessly. In fact, it may have already caused more damage by now than several years of forest fires in a row, but, even so, it's rare to find even a small article in the press. I'm actually convinced that 99 % of the Portuguese who mourn, around a coffee table, the losses of pines in another wildfire, would be surprised if we spoke to them of the pinewood nematode.

I could continue to give examples, but I think it's more useful to explore three possible ways to reverse the difficulty in mobilizing the media for the awareness and enlightenment of public opinion regarding the impact of invasive species.

My first suggestion has to do with the need to tell stories. Journalists and the public love stories, especially stories where there is some moral clarity. I can give you a few examples, starting with our infamous ice plant.

Matters little to people, as to reporters, to only know that the ice plant is an invasive species or that it undermines biodiversity. Our rural landscapes and our urban environments are filled with species that are not indigenous, species that came from very different parts of the world, and that doesn't bother people, on the contrary. More: the common idea that the ice plant is kind of a "garden plant" that "beautifies" the landscape does not help to make it an obvious candidate to be the villain of our story. Even recently a major Portuguese newspaper recommended its plantation in the gardening section, showing the most shocking ignorance, since the plantation of *Carpobrotus edulis* is forbidden by law.

It's now that our roman-carnation can make its appearance. After all, it is the victim of the invader. After all, it is the relic that we can lose. After all, it only exists there, in those hills around the Cape of Roca, it is something that only exists here, in Portugal, something ours. And that roman-carnation is now in jeopardy because a garden plant became a voracious settler of the rare places where the delicate plant still exists.

If we can build a story like this one, perhaps it might be easier to mobilize public opinion. It will be a more popular story and a stronger cause than, for example, to support actions to control the expansion of the ice plant into the mobile dunes inhabited by *Ammophila arenaria*, an herb that is as much uncharacteristic as ecologically important. The case for the *Ammophila* as a victim of the *Carpobrotus* would have to be made in a different way, perhaps more difficult for reaching the heart of common people, but not impossible. It could be presented as a Cinderella a-like, a forgotten herbal species that has a very important role to maintain the dunes and, because of that role, can save some popular beaches from the ocean's advance.

We must remember that it is not always easy to build narratives that make evident the nefarious character of an invasive alien species. A good example is the common cane, *Arundo donax*. Its introduction in our country is lost in the mists of time and its presence associated with ancient practices, from the construction of wind instruments to its use as insulation in building traditional roofs or as forms of protection of agricultural land against the wind. Very present in street names – there are countless Rua das Canas –, it can hardly be treated as a villain. In this case it should be easier to draw the attention of journalists focusing on some of its most harmful actions, such as siltation and clogging of waterways, behavior that may potentiate the effect of flash floods. That's something everybody can understand.

In a time of economic crisis we must also explore the economic impact of some invasive species. In Portugal is very easy, for instance, to make the case about the dangers of the pinewood nematode, and some journalist are already in alert. The pine forests are a national treasury and the devastation caused by *Bursaphelenchus xylophilus* in the pine industry are a matter of considerable concern.

Take another example, the common water hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes*, one of the more aggressive invasive species that can, if it find good conditions, to duplicate it's area in the steams each to weeks. The biodiversity impact is huge, but I think we can also focus the communication in the economic consequences of the invasion of irrigation areas, where this species can block the flow of water and damage all the infrastructure that supports the growing of agricultural crops in vast areas. It's exactly what is now happening in the Guadiana river in the Spanish Extremadura.

Another way to get the media attention is doing it indirectly. By reaching the general public directly and managing to create social movements. Those movements will then catch the attention of journalists.

It never hurts to remember that in the Internet era we ceased to depend on intermediaries - especially journalists - in order to reach the message recipients.

Also it never hurts to remember that with social media, the groups are not united by geographical proximity, but in the context of a virtual proximity aggregated by common interests.

In our days, Internet and its access is a reality still to be fully apprehended. Suffice to say that every minute 168 million emails are sent, 700,000 searches are conducted on Google, 600 new videos are placed on Youtube, 370 000 calls are held on Skype , 13,000 iPhone applications are downloaded; 60 new blogs are created. Every minute. This immense movement in this vast sea of information means that the Internet is the place where an increasing number of people spend their time. Specially in social networks: more than 98,000 tweets are posted every minute while over half a million comments are placed on Facebook, not to mention that 6,600 or more photos are uploaded on Flickr.

I must say that I found in Portugal a good example towards using the Internet to disseminate information and create a network of people interested and engaged in invasive alien species. I'm talking about the site Invasoras.pt, animated by a team from the University of Coimbra that had the intelligence to collaborate with a very smart online journalist. The site, that also has a Facebook page, as already managed to become a reference for journalists, who there can easily find scientific information or access specialists when comments or further explanations are needed.

In these new medias is important, along with the scientific rigor and focus on key issues, to keep in mind that we must animate communities and communicate with imagination. You need to know the language of these media, which implies a perception of proximity while acting in an uncomplicated fashion. Sometimes there are surprising results. For example, Facebook pages, can be created for a specific plant or animal, and kept alive with short stories and episodes involving common people. I know people who created a page for their pets and soon managed to gather more friends in that page than on their personal page. Why not try? The principle is simple: try to understand the medium, how it is ruled and how to interact in it.

Something is also guaranteed: if citizen movements emerge from these informal networks, sooner or later the journalists will appear.

Finally a few words about the relationship with journalists. This may not be easy, because you must take into consideration that these issues are sometimes complex and most journalists are just general topics experts. The funding crisis of journalism, which is noted all throughout the Western world, is also having a detrimental effect on the quality of the work of the newsrooms, from which many journalists are disappearing. Just think that in the last five, six years, almost all newsrooms of major media outlets in Western Europe and North America have lost dozens, in some cases hundreds of professionals. The cuts in the staff ranged from 20% to over 50%. Even the biggest newspapers, like the The New York Times or the Spanish El Pais, have lost an important part of their news staff. Several media outlets just disappeared. This to say that if in normal times you expected little attention from the media to such issues, add to that the present lack of journalists in our newsrooms.

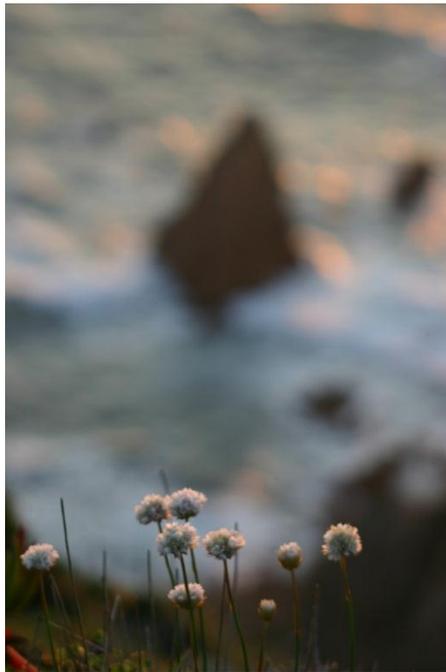
In this context it is very important to know how to combine a great willingness to help journalists find the essential information and some ability to resist their arrogance. This arrogance is often the result of lack of knowledge, and thats why the answer cannot be nor symmetrical nor an embedding for fear of being misquoted or misunderstood. Everybody should be open to give all necessary explanations, even those that seem obvious. Everybody must be available to help if necessary, even when you think it is not necessary. Everybody should answer quickly and in common words. There must be a genuine willingness to create bonds of any complicity. Do not forget that the journalists are looking for a story, a story ideally moral. The journalist, however, does not have to be militant or doctrinal, can and should ask tough questions or, worse than that, stupid questions, but it is always better to try to help than to harass them.

The difficulty of some of the issues related to invasive species, associated with the lack of specific education from the majority of journalists, recommends that, if necessary and if there is availability and demand, we invest in specific training. My experience, in areas ranging from political journalism to environmental journalism, through contemporary art or energy policies, is that if you can offer the journalists the opportunity to

deepen their knowledge in a structured and formal way, you will always find professionals available to improve themselves. Don't forget that journalists usually have training in humanities or social sciences, which remains very agonistic in relation to the natural sciences, which they call "hard". To most, scientific knowledge is a field that they cannot relate to.

We can do that in a more formal way, in collaboration with a University, with a specific academic credit allowance, or in a more informal way, through workshops or seminars. It's always important to have some field experience. It's also crucial to mobilize the collaboration of the professional associations of journalists, namely of those associations that focuses in environmental subjects.

To summarize, for journalists to be allies in the effort to disseminate information, and concern, around the invasive alien species is necessary to have access to good stories, clearly exposed, and have the perception that this is a subject that interests not only scientists and public officials, but also mobilizes important sectors of public opinion.



Armeria pseudoarmeria in Cabo da Roca area with the ocean in background