

Between Two Worlds: From Natural Disasters to Invasive Species

By: Deb Kornblut

When I began the research process, I intended to develop a project assessing the resiliency of government systems following natural disasters. I thought I had a game-plan and was ready to embark on a journey where the land shakes and the tides rise. Simultaneously with the confirmation of my research project, I was offered a position in Alaska with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service working on raising awareness throughout the state about aquatic invasive species (AIS). My decision seemed simple: by day I would work on addressing invasive species and by night I would focus on natural disasters.

Upon arrival in Alaska, I realized that I was in an extremely unique place to study invasives. The state has few invasive species at present, is dependent on salmon, and its population is widely dispersed. The introduction and spread of AIS can decimate the salmon populations and hence the livelihood of people across the state, while the breadth of the state entails that public engagement is crucial for any AIS efforts. With these insights, I changed my research question: “How has information about AIS permeated throughout the state?”

To answer this question I developed a ten question survey which captured local values, assessed the state of knowledge about AIS in the state, and gathered insights into effective communication mediums for this issue. My target audience was bait and tackle shops because of their ability to promote a message about preventing the spread of AIS through personalized conversations. Targeting major population hubs in Alaska, I attempted to make contact with 31 outdoor recreational vendors across Anchorage, Fairbanks, Soldotna, Wasilla, Seward, and Kodiak.

My results indicated that while the level of knowledge varies across respondents and regions, many vendors were familiar with AIS. About 100 different things were recognized as invasive species, but familiarity with the type of invasives ranged from broad terms such as “plants” to specific species, such as “northern pike.” Most locations were also concerned about AIS in one capacity or another and every location was willing to share information with their customers. Respondents cited “nature” and a “subsistence lifestyle” as key values for communication efforts, with passive mediums, such as pamphlets, posters, stickers, etc., comprising almost two thirds of responses regarding the preferred medium. Next, I began developing outreach materials which aligned with the data I gathered.

Further efforts on this project should pilot test the material I created in order to continue refining the messages which resonate with these shops and their customers. Other audiences, such as commercial fishermen or tourist companies, should be targeted as well to continue improving the messages and strategies utilized to tell the story of AIS in a variety of contexts.

Since returning home to Virginia, I have continued to work on my summer endeavors. Not only have I included the research in my honors thesis, but I was also invited to present at the Annual Alaska Invasive Species Workshop where I will share my findings with various parties working to prevent the spread of invasives. This summer would not have been possible without the ENSP research fund. Although I did not work with the theoretical world of natural disasters, my research changed how communication efforts for AIS are conducted in Alaska.

