

# Ontario First Nations encouraged to fight invasive species with ‘eyes on the ground’

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There are “big changes ahead” out on the land for Ontario’s First Nations as new invasive species arrive and older ones spread northward. This, according to said Sarah Rang, executive director of Canada’s Invasive Species Centre (ISC).

Still, the invaders are not going to take over without a fight, said Rang at a recent virtual forum sponsored by the Anishinabek Nation, the political and territorial organization for 39 Ontario First Nations.

Rang outlined efforts by her non-profit organization in partnership with the Anishinabek Nation to begin fighting back with 24 “micro-grants” of \$1,000 each to a series of First Nations for various projects.

The Missanabi Cree of northern Ontario are using the money to assess the risk from the insect pest known as Emerald Ash Borer, which has decimated ash trees in more southerly areas. Wahnapiatae First Nation near Sudbury in the north is working to identify which invasive species are in the community, she said.

Invasive species are the second biggest factor in reducing biodiversity around the world, surpassed only by habitat loss. Ontario is the hot spot for invasives in Canada with 400 species already logged. They are costing Ontario municipalities and conservation authorities \$50.8 million annually, Rang said.

Invasives impacting forestry, hunting, trapping and fishing threaten native species. Affects range from blocked land corridors, water access, and water travel-ways used by animals, hunters and fishers.

Plants and trees used for medicine, arts and crafts, ceremony and food may be crowded out by invasives, and trees valuable as windbreaks and for shade may also be under threat, according to Rang.

“We know these invasive species are impacting our environment, our territories, our traditional territories, regional territories, and the Anishinabek Nation as a collective,” said the Nations’ manager of Lands and Resources Rhonda Gagnon at an online event sponsored by ISC, headquartered in Sault Ste. Marie, earlier in February.

“First Nations’ lands and waters all need to be monitored for invasive species and right now there is no regular monitoring except for a very few,” she said.

One of those few is the Chippewas of Kettle & Stony Point, located along the south shore of Lake Huron where the battle against the giant aquatic reed phragmites began in 2010, according to Gagnon.

The community lost natural shoreline to the invasive reed, and saw a decline in birds, mammals, and waterfowl.

Since eradication was conducted, workers have been doing “touch-ups” annually and have been “very successful” in bringing a number of species back, including sandhill cranes, several turtle species and bald eagles.

One of ISC’s grants has helped the Nipissing First Nation in northern Ontario to use an aerial drone to survey kilometres of shoreline for phragmites, enabling crews to find and attack stands of the invader.

Curtis Avery, Nipissing’s environmental officer, says the drone allows him to survey almost 60 hectares per hour, and take up to 870 photographs over five hours. Next summer the drone will be back in use and workers will start eradicating phragmites discovered last year.

The nation is concerned that wetlands used for feeding by moose will be choked out if the water plant is allowed to thrive in the area.

The spread of invasive species is speeding up thanks to climate change, with extreme weather events stressing native species, allowing invasives to take over, according to Rang. Floods caused by climate change can move pieces of plants quickly to new areas, she said. The warming climate can improve reproduction of invasives and more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can increase herbicide resistance, she said.

Invasive water plants, including phragmites, Eurasian Watermilfoil, and Water Soldier, are established pests, while a new species, the European Water Chestnut, has recently been found on Wolfe Island at the entrance to the St. Lawrence River near Kingston, and has also been detected for the first time in the Niagara area, Rang said.

All of these are “fast-growing, tough to control, and can totally change our lakes and water.”

“These are big years” for forest invasives too, Rang said. A new insect pest, the hemlock wooly adelgid, has the potential to seriously damage the ecologically important hemlock in northern forests, while the oak wilt fungus is “knocking on the door,” creeping up through two American states closer to Ontario. The fungus “can actually kill off a big beautiful oak tree quite quickly,” Rang explained.

A new study suggests oak wilt could cost hundreds of millions of dollars in Eastern Canada. A record-breaking 1.77 million hectares of Ontario trees were defoliated last year by another invasive, the Spongy Moth, formerly known as the Gypsy Moth, which strips a tree of leaves without killing it. Still, according to Rang, the stripping makes trees more vulnerable to other pests and diseases.

She suggested the Invasive Species Centre and Anishinabek Nation could continue to work together in the future by training First Nation members to detect, report, and respond to invasive species in their own communities.

“Eyes on the ground” will be essential to slowing spread of the foreign pests, she said.

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