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*Sunday July 20, 2014*

## **Hypocrisy from an invasive species**

By Jim Taylor

The province of British Columbia is trying to keep out some unwelcome immigrants. Zebra and quagga mussels first sneaked into Canada in the 1980s as stowaways on the hulls of freighters coming up the St. Lawrence Seaway into the Great Lakes. They have since spread in Canada to Lake Winnipeg, and throughout 24 U.S. states as far west as California.

We don't want them in our lakes.

We didn't want Eurasian milfoil either, but it has become endemic.

In the air, starlings – deliberately introduced into North America in a mistaken tribute to Shakespeare – are now ranked among the world's 100 most invasive species.

On land, municipalities campaign to stamp out invasive plants. The names ripple off the tongue like the latest fad in herbal remedies: Dalmatian Toadflax, Hound's Tongue, Leafy Spurge, Orange Hawkweed, Puncturevine, Rush Skeletonweed, Russian Knapweed, Sulphur Cinquefoil, Tansy Ragwort, Velvetleaf, Western Sticktight, Yellow Starthistle....

And my personal favourite, Purple Loosestrife -- it sounds so much like provincial politics.

Along the lakeshore below my home, botanists identified 51 invasive plant species – defined as “non-native plants or ‘weeds’ that have been introduced to British Columbia without the insect predators and plant pathogens that help keep them in check in their native habitats.”

I'm surprised there were only 51. My own garden probably has that many non-native plants. And I'm far less adventurous with plants than a friend who grows the only banana tree north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.

But my garden plants are unlikely to be classed as invasive. We save that description for weeds -- plants we don't value.

## **Everyone but ourselves**

Ironic, isn't it, that decisions about what's invasive and what's desirable are made by the most invasive species of all?

Every other species – plant or animal – recognizes limits to its territory. Polar bears do not prowl the Amazon jungle; crocodiles do not lurk in bogs on Baffin Island. Alpine lichens do not infest the Amazon; even houseflies avoid the high Arctic.

But we humans settle everywhere, from the sands of the Sahara to the permafrost of Siberia to the pulsating humidity of the Congo. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has altered the Okanagan Valley as much as human habitation. Even so, we humans have had far less impact here than in, say, Mexico City or Tokyo.

We are the only species that not only overruns a region, squeezing out local flora and fauna. We are the only species that uses technology to rebuild the landscape to suit ourselves. No one else paves the land with blacktop, buries it under buildings, or rips it apart to extract minerals.

It's as if purple loosestrife should say, “Those other plants are invasive, but not me. I belong here.”

## Constant denial

This thought particularly comes to mind at the height of a forest fire season. Two-thirds of the entire province of B.C. is considered at extreme fire risk. With six weeks still to go in fire season, the province has already had around 500 fires. Statistics from recent weeks suggest that three-quarters of all B.C. fires have human origins. Not necessarily deliberate arson. More likely carelessness -- a campfire, not fully extinguished. A smouldering cigarette butt flipped out a car window. A bottle fragment that focusses the sun's rays onto a dry leaf. A spark from a backwoods vehicle scraping against a rock.

The fires ravaging the Northwest Territories, by contrast, were mostly lightning caused. But even there, humans bear some complicity. Hotter summers mean more thunderstorms, more lightning strikes, drier forests for them to ignite.

Don't tell me that climate change is beyond human capacity. There has been no huge increase in volcanic activity. Tropical forests have not voluntarily logged themselves. Solar radiation varies, yes, but not enough to account for the earth's steadily increasing temperatures.

The single dominant variable over the last 200 years of rising temperatures has been the explosive growth of human population, from less than one billion at the start of the Industrial Revolution to over seven billion today. Since we started burning fossil fuels, we have released millions of years' worth of stored solar energy.

Yet like small children standing in the wreckage of Mom's favourite floor lamp, we scream, "It wasn't me! I didn't do it!"

## Humility desired

I'm not suggesting we should go back to the medicines, science, and technology of the Middle Ages. Nor am I suggesting that all recent inhabitants of the Americas should pack up and return to our ancestral homelands.

But I believe we do need to debunk our holier-than-thou attitude to our effect on the world around us, and to admit that we are an invasive species who have a huge effect on the planet's environment.

A bit of realistic humility wouldn't hurt this particular invasive species.

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## YOUR TURN

Lots of mail about last week's column, which took off from the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that corporations can have religious convictions, just like real people.

Ginny Adams responded, "I do believe that those of us, not part of those closely held corporation, have one power over this entity -- money. My family has decided that Hobby Lobby has nothing we can't live without, that we can buy merchandise like they sell other places. Our money will go to other places."

Isabel Gibson tackled the central issue: "I quite agree that it's weird to give corporations 'person' status. But maybe it reflects our own confusion about what they are. With respect to corporations (and organizations, more broadly), I hear motives attributed and morals appraised (usually impugned). All just as if they were, you know, people.

"By and large I think we can trace actions (and responsibility) to people (of the bipedal variety), but it seems there is something about joint action in organizations/corporations that can pervert what would be our normal human reactions. Does the apparent anonymity just let us think we can get away with things we wouldn't otherwise

try? Do organizations/corporations have a life force of their own, or are they just the sum of what all the people working there decide to do? Beats me.”

James West sent a cryptic note: “Whoa! Incarnation is to Incorporation as Corporation is to Congregation.”

When I asked him to explain more, James wrote back, “Those who live by the corporation die by the corporation. Congregations are also affected by rulings regarding corporations. An incorporated congregation has religious beliefs now protected by federal and state laws and regulations. Therefore, it's not that far of a stretch to argue for the protection of the right of a corporation to hold religious beliefs.”

Janie Wallbrown shared a similar viewpoint: “Most of our US churches are corporations....incorporated. A legal necessity in case of suing. Is that true also in Canada?”

My own church, the United Church of Canada, was created by an Act of Parliament. I believe all other churches would at least have some legal entity.

Janie added, “I found this latest Supreme Court decision disturbing myself. I admire your continued ability to expend energy on the very many such disturbing things by bringing them up and providing an avenue for civilized discourse.”

Steve Roney offered an extensive defence of corporations: “First, if we deny corporations legal standing as persons, we are essentially eliminating corporations. Corporations would then not be able to enforce a contract, and so they simply could not operate. This would hardly be a good thing. Besides the general economic collapse, we would inevitably go back to a world in which the distribution of wealth was far less equal, and everything was in the hands of a small number of rich capitalists; corporations let people with far less capital get into the game.

“Second, it seems odd that this [personhood for corporations] should still be controversial, since it has been a legal principle since at least 1819. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. So it is a pretty radical suggestion that it should be done away with.

Third, as you point out, religious denominations and organizations of all kinds are themselves corporations; so you cannot say corporations cannot have religious scruples. Then can you write that “no corporation has ever come to church?” A church IS a corporation. (And no corporations, no churches. I see a problem here.)

“Fourth, it is obviously true that corporations ARE people, in the sense that matters morally: they do not really exist apart from the people who own them, work for them, or do business with them. Therefore, you cannot take a right away from them without taking it away from actual people, the people who own or work for the corporation, by doing so. Any more than you can tax a corporation without thereby taxing the people who own it, work for it, or deal with it. (And, by the way, you CAN send individuals to jail over corporate misdeeds, as is indeed done—the responsible corporate officers.) Therefore, equal protection applies—the equal protection assumed as an inalienable right in the Declaration of Independence, quite apart from the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.”

Laurina Tallman took the opposite perspective: “Applause to you for another succinct and lucid exposition of one of the great issues of our times, the twisting of corporate entities into idolatrous ‘persons.’

“...You are operating a school for self-expression. Thank you for inviting your readers into a ‘conversation’ at the end of your column. Not only are you shepherding a school but you have created and are leading a virtual church of the highest order in that meeting of minds, for which I am profoundly grateful.”

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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