



Regulating an Unruly Nature. Invasive Alien Species, Monstrosity and the Law

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Abstract

This article explores how invasive alien species are imagined, represented, and regulated in contemporary Sweden, focusing on the entanglement between biological threat, cultural fear, and bureaucratic control. Drawing on ethnographic material, policy analysis, and consultation documents, it examines how plants and animals such as Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed, and the “killer slug” are framed through tropes of monstrosity in media, legislation, and public discourse. Using monster theory (Cohen 1996) and scholarship on lists and classification, the article argues that monstrosity not only shapes perceptions of invasive species but also infuses the legal and administrative systems designed to contain them. The emerging *regulating complex*, a network of EU and Swedish regulations, lists, and responsibilities, appears both as a tool for ecological order and as a hybrid, excessive, and unruly entity in itself. The study shows how attempts to tame ecological disorder through listing practices mirror the very qualities attributed to invasive species: hybridity, excess, and uncontrollability. The result is a perfect monster of the present environmental moment – an assemblage of biological and bureaucratic life that reflects contemporary anxieties about nature, governance, and the limits of human control.

Keywords: Invasive alien species, Monstrosity, Culture/Nature, Cohen’s Monster Theory, Biopolitics, Environmental governance, More-than-human relations, Media representation



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Introduction

It's a MONSTER, get rid of the crap
(Byggahus.se, May 23, 2005).

The quote comes from an internet forum where a garden owner expresses his frustration over the giant hogweed in his garden. Over the past decade, and often described in threatening and monstrous terms, invasive alien species have been a recurring feature on social media and in news reporting on environmental changes. The giant hogweed is an example of such an invasive plant. During this period, the management of these alien species has also become a prioritised task for Swedish authorities. In addition to drives aimed at eradicating designated species, this work has involved information campaigns and an effort to create regulations concerning invasive species. An important element in this process has been to produce lists of species threatening the Swedish flora and fauna.

This article will address this topic in two steps. First, we examine how invasive alien species have been represented in Swedish public discourse, with particular attention to the ways in which media and social media repeatedly cast them in monstrous terms. On the basis of this analysis, we then shift focus to the regulatory sphere, where we initially analyse how the regulatory complex designed to govern invasive species has taken shape, and then show how it itself acquires monstrous qualities through its hybridity, excess, and tendency to generate confusion.

The term “Invasive Alien Species” may evoke images of space invaders or encounters with fearsome intergalactic creatures, but the term has its origins in biology. Invasive Alien Species is often defined as “introduced species (intentionally or unintentionally) that become established in a new environment, then spread in ways that are destructive to human interests and natural systems.” (UNEP 2023). It should also be stated that what is categorised as invasive alien is tied to human made boundaries in time and space (Head 2012). In a Swedish context, species established in the wild within the national borders prior to 1800 are perceived as native nature. Other countries work with other time frames related to their historical situation.

Humans have probably always contributed to the establishment of new plants and animals when moving from one area to another. Sometimes it has been done deliberately and with unintended consequences. Well-known are the descriptions of how introduced species have interfered with the Australian fauna when rabbits, foxes and other European farm animals changed the conditions. Just as significantly, are the species that unintentionally have become part of human travels, such as marine creatures in ballast tanks. With increased globalisation and environmental changes, the spread of alien species has escalated, and today invasive species are identified as one of the biggest threats to biodiversity. This

has prompted extensive work to limit the impact, occurring on regional, national and supranational levels, including both the United Nations and the European Union. Importantly, at the center of this lies the constitution of nations and regions with notions about which flora and fauna belong to the landscape and, equally important, which do not (Árnason & Kuprian 2017, Lagerqvist et al. 2024). The environmental changes caused by human movements across the globe, and even more, the promises of future changes have created a zeitgeist holding uncertainties and feelings of insecurity (Bangstad & Pétursdóttir 2021).

This article is part of a project studying the management of “invasive alien species” in Sweden. A recurring observation is how the invasive species are described as threatening and frightening. The aim here is to deepen these findings by exploring the processes of capturing invasive alien species within juridical and bureaucratic frameworks. Initially, it could be obvious how plants and animals have been described in monstrous terms. However, as we will soon show, it is not only the invasive species but also the authorities’ work of regulating such species that can be experienced as a threat. With support from theories from monster research, we will show how and what expressions these threatening images can take.

The work of reducing the spread of invasive species has created what we call a *regulating complex*. This refers to a process that includes the emergence of regulations and the work of producing lists of invasive species. This also includes the work of initiating these regulations, their surveillance and the adaptation of lists and regulations to new environmental conditions. In other words, the regulating complex contains the legal work of the authorities in managing invasive species.

The project group behind this article has investigated how invasive alien species are managed in different contexts since 2017. The investigation has drawn attention to how associations, entrepreneurs, individuals and national and regional authorities approach the task in different contexts. We have worked in an ethnographic tradition with interviews and observations. We have participated in the eradication of lupins and skunk cabbage, and inventoried Pacific oysters. We have spoken to municipal ecologists, researchers, government employees and people engaged in non-profit associations. In addition, government texts, information materials and media reports have also been scrutinised. The authorities’ work to list and regulate invasive species has been a recurring feature in all these contexts. For the national authorities, it has been a main task. For associations, regions and private individuals, the listing work has been found to be both a threat and a promise. This article is therefore based on a larger, disparate material collected over a longer period. An important part of the article work has been to identify concrete information about the work of the authorities, but also to see how lists – both existing and in the making – have been referenced in both specific and general terms.

This article is to a large extent based on interviews with actors who have been involved in various ways in the work of managing invasive species in Sweden: researchers, agency representatives, organisations, and interest groups. To this are added the consultation responses from various actors regarding two central documents: the memorandum New Ordinance on Invasive Alien Species, KN2025/01024 (Swedish Government 2025), which proposes to replace the previous ordinance from 2018, and the Proposal for a National List of Invasive Alien Species, KN2023/03476 (Swedish Government 2023). All of this material are important parts of a larger legislative apparatus where nature's transformation, bureaucratic logic, and various societal interests meet – and collide.¹

The proposed new ordinance (KN2025/01024) aims to replace the previous ordinance (SFS 2018:1939) and contains more detailed provisions regarding management, distribution of responsibilities, and measures related to invasive species. The consultation responses to this often address questions about the distribution of responsibilities between agencies, property rights, and the need for resources for implementation. In KN2023/03476, the focus lies on establishing a national list of invasive alien species of particular significance for Sweden. Its consultation responses tend to focus on which species should be included in the list and how these species affect different sectors.

Theory of monsters, lists and species out of place

This article explores what happens when theories of monsters and lists are merged in a cultural analysis of nature and environmental management. In this, we are initially based on research within the humanities and social sciences that have shown that invasive alien species are not only ecological phenomena but also culturally produced problems, shaped by scientific definitions and long-standing ideas about which beings “belong” in particular landscapes (Lagerqvist et al. 2024). Scholars highlight how invasiveness is framed through spatial and temporal boundaries (Head 2012 & 2015), tied to colonial histories and national imaginaries (Árnason & Kuprian 2017), and embedded in broader biodiversity discourses that have generated an “alien invasion industry” (Thompson 2014). These framings carry ethical and affective dimensions, casting certain species as agents of change that evoke a “lingering threat” (Bangstad & Pétursdóttir 2021, see also Larson et al. 2005), in Ahmed's words (2014) becoming “sticky objects” saturated with emotions mobilising political consensus, across ideological divides, as well as conflicts (Frihammar et al. 2021).

¹ During the very final stages of this article's preparation, the proposal was formally approved and the new national list of invasive alien species in Sweden entered into force on 15 May 2026 (2026:311), listing 34 species (9 terrestrial and 25 aquatic).

Using the concept of monstrosity as an analytical perspective opens up a deeper understanding of how and why something comes to be perceived as threatening. It explores how imaginaries of threat are shaped within society, and how they are expressed in relation to contemporary environmental transformations – here with particular attention to invasive alien species. The monster serves as a lens through which to examine how societies experience, construct, negotiate, and attempt to manage threats. Through this perspective, it becomes possible to render visible and analyse the unsettling and disturbing dimensions that inform not only the perception of the species themselves, but also the bureaucratic, administrative and practical attempts at management that emerge in their wake – and how these in turn may generate new forms of fear, anxiety and crisis. In this way, monstrosity becomes a tool for broadly investigating the threatening and troubling qualities that characterise “invasive alien species” as a phenomenon and problem in society.

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have noted how public discourse and outreach borrow horror tropes to cast invasive alien species as existential dangers (Maggulli 2023). Others analyse how labelling organisms as invasive renders them abject nature, shaping both cognitive and affective responses that make them appear killable (Davis 2022, Fleischmann 2023). These framings reveal monstrosity’s role in structuring cultural perceptions of danger, difference, and control. But what exactly defines the monster? And what does it tell us?

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory* (1996) provides a useful framework for this. He reminds us that the monster’s body is always a cultural body, an embodiment of a specific historical moment and its anxieties. Monsters are notoriously difficult to contain: they always return, refusing closure. They unsettle order by inhabiting hybrid or unstable categories, thereby generating what Cohen calls “category crisis”. They also personify difference, giving flesh to what is excluded or alien, and they police the borders of the possible by embodying forbidden desires and behaviours. Importantly, fear of the monster is entwined with desire, since monsters also attract and fascinate, offering temporary release from constraint. Ultimately, monsters reflect ourselves: as Cohen insists, they are our “children”, exposing what a culture rejects but cannot entirely disavow. Another recurrent trait, not emphasised as a thesis by Cohen but implicit in many of them, is excess. Monsters are frequently imagined as too large, too fecund, too unruly. Their scale itself becomes threatening, a sign of forces that spill over cultural boundaries. As Carroll (1990) observes, monstrosity often appears as an exaggeration of traits, a disturbing excess that unsettles proportion, balance, and norm.

Every era produces its own monster. In the Swedish pre-industrial agrarian society, nature appeared in monstrous forms. *Näcken* (literally “The naked one”), *Bäckahästen* (“The brook horse”), personified the deceptive powers of water with an edifying undertone: be cautious when near running waters. The *Skogsräet*’s

(literally “the female of the forest”) double-natured being warned of the forest; from the front, she is irresistibly beautiful and lured men to follow her into the wild, but when she turned, her true grotesque form was revealed – her back dark, terrifying hollow. In a society dependent on natural resources, such figures articulated collective anxieties about the precarious balance between human survival and nature’s unruly forces. Also, nature and the law in combination produced their own monster – for example “Lyktgubben” (literally “The Lantern Man”) who wandered around with his lantern at disputed land boundaries. Today, other aspects of the natural world provoke fear: uncontrollable rising temperatures, extreme weather, flooding, and – central to this study – the proliferation of new species perceived as encroaching and taking over in threatening, ungovernable ways.

Following the above academic traditions and theoretical perspectives, in this article, we attempt to unpack and understand the significance of invasive alien species and the consequences when they enter the realm of (Swedish) legal and bureaucratic context. With this dual focus – on both the species themselves and their legal framings – we are confronted with two distinct forms of monstrosity. First, we encounter animals and plants perceived and described as monstrous. Second, we analyse how the regulating complex of invasive alien species – under development for some time in Sweden – can itself be perceived and function as a kind of monster. While the very category of invasive alien species gathers together (highly diverse) organisms and lends them a shared monstrous aspect, it is when a species is erected on the list that their status as a matter out of place is realized in relation to the law.

This is where a theory of lists becomes crucial. In environmental governance (as in most legislation work), lists have become central instruments (Braverman 2016). However, and importantly, lists are not neutral mirrors of the order of reality. At a basic level, already to assemble a list is to reformat reality into discrete, comparable entities (Stäheli 2015). Secondly, and likewise important: lists tell us something. However, unlike narratives, which create meaning through sequence and causality, lists generate meaning through juxtaposition and selection (Goody 1977). This structure produces an aura of objectivity, masking classificatory choices and reinforcing bureaucratic authority. As de Goede et al. (2015) argue, listing is a performative technology: it generates the very objects it names and helps constitute the frameworks within which they acquire meaning. However, the politics of a list begins well before the list itself is finalised (Stäheli 2015). The Swedish list of invasive alien species illustrates this clearly: although not yet legally in force (as of early spring 2026), it has long influenced debate, practices and policy.

As mentioned, lists function as key tools in various aspects of environmental regulation and conservation (Braverman 2016). The “red list” is well known as a way to pinpoint and identify species in need of protection. They also function as

key channels of communication to the public, playing a crucial role in shaping how different species are perceived, valued, and governed. While red lists are well known and select species that are valued and of conservation interest, invasive alien species lists are newer and function more as ecological “blacklists”, branding organisms as dangerous or unwanted. In practice, they operate as lists of monsters, framing targeted species as alien threats. Once created, lists tend to multiply and develop a life of their own, producing unforeseen effects (Leyshon & Thrift 1999, Stäheli 2015). In seeking to impose order on a complex reality, they also expose and concentrate its unruly excess: reality is infinite, lists are finite (Cohen 1996, Eco 2008). As we will demonstrate, this dynamic becomes especially evident when what the legislation is supposed to regulate are living organisms that move and change in unpredictable ways based on their own conditions and possibilities.

Becoming Monsters

In this section, our focus rests on a number of species that frequently have appeared in the Swedish debate on invasive alien species, and on the ways in which they time and again have been framed so as to evoke the monstrous. The discourse surrounding these species readily activates imaginaries of threat and disorder. For example, we have noticed that when our students are asked about their initial associations with the term “invasive alien species”, they are more likely to mention “danger”, “threat”, “science fiction” and “foreign”, than “ecology” or “biodiversity”. The characteristics and behaviours of species regarded as invasive invite comparison with classical and contemporary monsters: like the Hydra, they may sprout even more when trying to fight them; as in the tale of Dr Frankenstein, they may seem to acquire an uncontrollable life of their own; sometimes they may attack like Triffids, or shift shape from alluring flower to suffocating weed – nature’s own Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Also, applying the very term “alien” (derived from the Latin *alieno*, -are and *alienus*, terms that convey the sense of making something someone else’s, or marking it as ‘other’) reinforces this monstrous imagery: the word commonly evokes extraterrestrials or something that does not belong.² And, of course, Alien is the name of one of popular culture’s most recognisable monsters. In order to

2 However, there is reason to be cautious about drawing far-reaching conclusions from the literal meanings or etymologies of these terms. The present study was conducted in a Swedish context, where the expression for invasive alien species is “invasiv främmande art”. This is also the formally correct biological designation for species that have been relocated (and are therefore “alien”) and that, in their new environment, spread at the expense of other species (and are therefore “invasive”). In everyday language, however, the word “främmande” (“alien”) is often omitted, and the term used is simply “invasiv art” (“invasive species”), where the “alien” dimension is implicit. This occurs among people without biological training, in media reporting, and quite often even in expert contexts, unless the explicit issue at hand concerns whether the species should be classified as alien or not.

understand these dynamics, Cohen's Monster Theory may serve as an analytical lens.

To start with: the media is one of the prime monster-makers. In and through media discourse, the monstrosity of invasive alien species is created and spread. Headlines and reports dramatise these organisms as grotesque invaders that menace not only ecosystems but also homes, gardens, and infrastructures. Media logic generally stresses tension and spectacle, and simplifies complexity by constructing straightforward stories with easily identifiable "good ones" and "bad ones" (Altheide & Snow 1979). Here, invasive alien species become a perfect nemesis. They are new and unfamiliar, fitting easily into narratives about menaces against "our" landscape. The sense of threat is central, as the media seeks to attract audiences, and threat (especially if it might concern the reader) attracts attention. Social media is likewise an arena where invasive alien species appear as monsters. In Facebook groups such as "Death to Japanese Knotweed", "Lupin Extermination Initiative" or "The Killer Slug's Worst Enemies", members share their often very unpleasant experiences with the species in question, constituting new communities around perceived threats (for an analysis of how engagement with invasive species can function as a unifying force, see Frihammar et al. 2021).

Notorious Species

The monster metaphor is *legio* in the discourse on invasive species. Mentioned in the initial quote opening this article was the giant hogweed, a plant that for long has received attention as monstrous and often described as one of the most notorious among invasive plants. When described in the media, the focus is often on its sap, which can cause serious rashes if it gets on the skin and is exposed to sunlight. This, combined with its height and strikingly large leaves and flowers, conjures up the image of a Triffid, a creature known from the science fiction novel *The Day of the Triffids*, by John Wyndham.

As the concept of invasive alien species has emerged as a recognised environmental concern, the giant hogweed has been joined by other "celebrities" in the invasive pantheon. One of these is Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), to which we shall return soon. Others that regularly feature in the debate include garden lupin (*Lupinus polyphyllus*), Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*), Canadian goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*), skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*), mink (*Neovison vison*), signal crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*), the flatworm *Polycelis tenuis* and the killer slug (*Arion vulgaris*). Each carries its own distinctive monstrous traits. Elsewhere, we have written in detail about how the lupin has become the "poster child" of invasive species in Sweden, its once-celebrated vibrant blooms and vigorous growth now interpreted through a register of threat and dread (Lagerqvist et al. 2024). One informant described how, with growing awareness of

the plant's invasiveness and uncontrolled spread, she came to see its splendour as harsh, even vulgar, though she had once appreciated the colourful fields of lupins (interview County Administrative Board in Dalarna 2017). What had seemed beautiful excess was transformed into something unsettling.

Himalayan balsam, for its part, is often described as excessive in nectar, offering “extremely large amounts” that lure pollinating insects away from native flowers. Its seed pods “explode like bombs”, catapulting seeds across wide areas (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2025A). “Beautiful green monster” is the epithet bestowed upon the plant in a Facebook post from the municipality of Hårryda (Hårryda municipality, June 2, 2022). Canadian goldenrod is said to “have a tendency to invade” and “a single plant produces thousands of seeds” (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2025B). Skunk cabbage boasts “enormous leaves” that “push aside everything else that once grew there” (Vi i Villa, May 20, 2025). It “poses a threat to the natural vegetation”, the municipality of Gothenburg asserts on its website (Gothenburg Municipality 2025) – a formulation that implicitly frames the plant as unnatural, or perhaps even as otherworldly, bordering on the magical realm. Mink, meanwhile, is cast as a “successful coloniser” (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2025C), its chilling quality being its escape from human fur farms to thrive elsewhere – the monster always gets away, as Cohen has taught us.

One more species, reappearing in discussion of invasive species, is the signal crayfish, often accused of spreading the “monster disease” (crayfish plague) as in a child-friendly information film (*Sagan om kräftan*, 2025). The flatworm *Polycelis tenuis*, a relative newcomer to the Swedish fauna, has raised similar anxieties. Hiding in the soil of flowerpots, it inspires little reassurance when described, in the words of state radio, as an “invasion of a carnivorous worm with 200 eyes” (Sveriges Radio, 1 March 2025). It is all too easy to conjure the image of an alien-like monster hidden within the homeliest of objects: the potted plant.

Monster by Name

In many instances, anxieties surrounding the species are articulated through the frightening names attributed to it in both everyday language and media discourse. For example, when the oyster *Magallana gigas* began establishing itself on the Swedish west coast two decades ago, the media swiftly dubbed it the “Japanese giant oyster”, evoking the figure of an alien invader rather than the luxury *fine de claire*, which is a name by which the species is also known. A similar process marked the discovery of the sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum* in Kosterhavet National Park in 2022, nicknamed “sea vomit” (a translation from Norwegian and English), a name that vividly evoked disgust. In these cases, the authorities actively sought to de-monsterise species through renaming: *Magallana gigas* was officially rendered the international name “Pacific oyster”, and *Didemnum vexillum* was given the Swedish name *filtsjöpfung*

(literally “felt sea squirt”, original English name “carpet sea squirt”).

Above, as in many other cases, authorities and experts contribute to nuanced media discourse by launching scientifically based, and thus more sober, names and narratives. The exception that proves the rule is the killer snail. Since it was first recorded in Sweden in the 1970s, it has spread widely, becoming a scourge for gardeners across the country as it devours their crops. Here, it is the sheer numbers, the slimy body, the ravenous appetite and the behaviour – these slugs readily consume their own dead – that arouse unease. Once known as the “Spanish forest slug”, it was officially renamed the “killer slug” (mördarsnigel) in 2021, when the Swedish Species Information Centre adopted the monster idiom already popular among gardeners and underscoring the creature’s cannibalistic, taboo-breaking qualities.

Breaking the Law(n)

The monster-species par excellence in our material (and elsewhere) is Japanese knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*). The plant is routinely depicted as a terrifying floral beast. Headlines speak of a “WAR AGAINST THE HORROR PLANT – came in through the KITCHEN FLOOR” (*Aftonbladet*, October 26, 2020), or announce that “The municipality gives up the fight against the monster plant” (*Kristianstadsbladet*, February 23, 2022). *Göteborgsposten* (September 10, 2025) literary called the plant “a hydra”, since every attempt to cut or poison it only generates new shoots.

While many invasive species evoke one or two monstrous associations, Japanese knotweed condenses an entire cluster of anxieties into a single vegetal figure. So, let’s spend a little time figuring out what’s waking up the monster in this specific species. At first glance, it is neither particularly striking nor frightening. It resembles a bamboo with green leaves. But its monster qualities lie not in its appearance, but in how it behaves. First and foremost, it is a plant of extraordinary vigour. It grows fast and high, and it seems impossible to stop. It follows humans closely; it is in the garden; it is in the park; it is in the roadsides. Its root fragments are transported with excavated soil to construction sites and railway works. Wherever human activity seeks to build, it threatens to emerge as an uninvited guest. It sprouts through asphalt, creeping back after herbicide, reappearing where it was thought destroyed. Here, ecological, cultural, legal, and economic fears merge, giving the plant an unusually strong symbolic charge. Yet fear of the monster plant is bound up with fascination. Media linger on its excesses – Japanese knotweed makes good headlines; come and read about houses devalued, walls cracked, landscapes overwhelmed. The fasciation-laden fear also resonates in our interviews. Despite years of futile eradication efforts, one man admitted he could not help but admire its vitality (retired researcher, The Institute of Freshwater Research interview, 2025). Adding to this, the plant has been the subject of juridical disputes in different parts

of the world. In Sweden, the presence of Japanese knotweed has constituted a legal obstacle in the transfer of real estate (see e.g. *Aftonbladet*, November 30, 2025).

To sum up: It appears that almost any introduced species may be cast as a monster – large like giant hogweed or small like the flatworm, beautiful like the garden lupine or ugly like the “felt sea squirt”, solitary in its appearance like the mink or proliferating in numbers like the Pacific oyster. Certain cases stand out: often it is species that are charismatic in some way, yet just as often it is those that affect humans most directly and materially. Japanese knotweed, for instance, becomes a monster when it pushes through the very walls built to separate culture from wild nature.

The monstrosity of invasive alien species thus comes alive in everyday talk and media reports about harmful insects and pests in the garden, or unfamiliar flowers and animals in the landscape. However, and importantly, these species are more than monstrous representations; they are living organisms with agency that often, in very concrete ways, undermine or destroy what humans have accomplished and constructed. The killer slug really does devour the vegetables that the amateur gardener has carefully tended and longed for. Japanese knotweed relentlessly forces up its small red “devil’s horns” (as its shoots are often called) in the very place where the homeowner desires a lawn. To enjoy the roadside’s biological richness and diversity becomes impossible once lupines have taken hold. Anyone who has cut their feet bloody on a Pacific oyster is hardly consoled by being told that its monstrosity is merely a cultural construction. And it is a fact that the crayfish plague today has reduced the stock of native noble crayfish to only 2% of its former size: indeed a “monster disease”.

It is these concrete perceptions of threat, and in some cases the drastic effects on human domains some new species have, that have underscored the need for a legal framework. An equally important, and often even more prominently articulated, driving force has been a desire to safeguard biodiversity and to protect already threatened native species. In what follows, we turn our attention to this extensive undertaking.

Establishing a Regulating Complex

At first glance, the regulating complex that frames the management of invasive alien species may seem incomprehensible. There is a myriad of intricate rules that grow and thrive within different administrative frames. There are EU regulations and then there are national and regional guidelines and recommendations that various authorities have established. It may therefore be good to initially describe the structure of the regulations.

Starting with the EU regulation (EU1143/2014), the directive on invasive alien species contains two parts. First, a regulation applying to the management of

invasive alien species aiming to comprehensively protect biodiversity and ecosystem services, as well as to minimise and mitigate negative impacts that these species may have on human health and the economy. The second part consists of a list where the species covered by the regulation are listed. This is the original monster list! The animals and plants on the list are considered to be capable of causing such significant damage within the EU that they warrant a ban in all EU countries. The species on the list must therefore not be introduced into the country, spread in the wild or encouraged to increase in number. It is also prohibited to possess, sell, exchange and import these species. The EU regulation was adopted in 2015, and the first list came in 2016. The list has been regularly updated since its introduction.

It may seem obvious, but it should be mentioned, the restrictions and directives set out in the list and regulation do not apply to animals and plants themselves, even though they are enumerated. Instead, it is a regulation for people and what they can and cannot do with species considered to be alien and invasive. However, it is a way of monitoring a geographical border area and what is allowed to live and strive within its borders. In other words, it is a list of species hailed to be eradicated. Thus, it is a biopolitical regulating complex, affecting the lives of humans and other-than-humans.

When the EU launched its list, it became the starting point for a more comprehensive Swedish effort to manage invasive alien species. Although knowledge about invasive species has existed for a long time, it was when the EU instigated a regulation of invasive species that the issue gained a more prominent place on the Swedish agenda. The starting point was to develop a legal tool to be able to ban and take measures against invasive alien species causing problems in Sweden, but that are not covered by the EU list. Several of the species on the EU-list have never occurred in Sweden, and are not expected to do so. While at the same time, there are many other species that are not on the EU list that can be perceived as invasive and alien in a Swedish region. These include, for example, the previously mentioned Garden lupine.

As with the EU, Swedish authorities work with a two-fold starting point for limiting the impact of invasive alien species, first the regulation, then the national list of designated species. On 1 January 2019, Sweden received its first regulation on invasive alien species (SFS 2018:1939). This describes the division of responsibilities between different Swedish authorities and complements the EU regulation on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species. As with the EU, the regulation must be supplemented with a list. The list has been a more difficult task to solve. A first draft was submitted to the Government Offices (Regeringskansliet) in the spring of 2023 (Swedish Government 2023), with a round of consultations taking place in 2024, and with close to a hundred consultations being received. Based on these, a new

proposal was developed consisting of about 30 species along with an updated regulation.

Two main authorities have been engaged in the regulating work: the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency covers land areas with plants and animals and the Swedish Marine and Water Authority covers plants and animals living in the water. The fact that a species is included on a national list makes it possible, for example, to introduce distinct bans, design systems for supervision, it gives landowners a responsibility and provides the possibility of land access for the supervisory authorities. It gives county administrative boards and municipalities a legal opportunity to act. The national list can be freer in its regulations. The restrictions can apply to parts of the nation, and it may state that it is permitted to have a species on the property, as long as it does not spread.

In preparation for the national list of regulated invasive alien species, another list has been important, namely the risk classification of alien species (Strand et al., 2018). The first list of species negatively affecting Swedish nature was submitted in 2018/2019 and supplemented with an update in 2025. In total, some 1000 alien species were listed, of which 257 species were considered to have a high or very high risk of becoming invasive in Sweden within 50 years. A number of these species was then selected and subjected to a socio-economic analysis, and it was investigated whether they contributed or threatened ecosystem services, what damage costs they could generate, what effects they have on human health and whether they affect people's ability to stay in nature. Important to highlight in this context, a species could be invasive, alien and harmful without being on the national list. Occasionally, a species is both well established and common to an extent that it cannot be eradicated.

As shown, the new Swedish legislation concerning invasive species has gradually taken shape. On desks and in inquiries, in consultation responses and in agency correspondence, it is assuming form. But whilst the legislation is taking shape, it is also beginning to emerge in another guise: as something overwhelming, swelling, almost monstrous. This is legislation that is not only meant to control nature, but which itself risks becoming a creature that no one quite knows how to handle. As we move forward, it is to see how the regulations have affected those who manage the invasive species.

“...it's going to be chaos”

If the creatures we have encountered so far have been living organisms perceived as unpleasant, dangerous, frightening, or repulsive because of their slimy properties or bad behaviours, we now turn to a presence of a different kind. The next monster is juridical and bureaucratic.

Overall, there is broad support for establishing a national regulation and list of invasive alien species in Sweden. Yet beneath the surface, our empirical material reveals another narrative. In consultation responses and interviews a creeping anxiety lingers: what may the regulation unleash? We have met it at regional and local authorities, as well as in organisations connected to gardening, agriculture, business, botany and the environment. Like invasive nature, the regulating complex seems to evoke a sense of being overwhelmed, exhausted, and paralysed. Its ambition to impose order risks to instead produce a sense of things spiralling out of control – a swelling entity that exceeds human comprehension. It is this threatening quality of both excess and ambiguity that we now turn to examine.

On paper, the regulation and its list appear neat and orderly: new rules for responsibility, supervision, and resources; a straightforward list of species to be halted. However, even before examining how actors themselves perceive the framework, several monstrous traits are noticeable.

As with the category of invasive alien species, the legislation embodies contemporary societal anxieties about ecological loss, economic damage, the unruly Other, and the impossibility of fully controlling change. It appears as an omen of disrupted categories, identifying organisms that are both part of, and alien to, the flora and fauna of a place: species present, yet not “fitting”. Moreover, the regulation and its list dwell at the gates of difference (Cohen 1996). They gather heterogeneous organisms, amplify the estrangement, and signal habitats transformed. Explicitly, they pinpoint what is different and not fitting in – the Other – and how to stop or manage that. In doing so, certain species are produced and reinforced as enemies to the order, showing the list’s power as a performative technology (Goede et al. 2015).

The regulating complex functions as a boundary-making entity, prescribing limits and dictating which, where and how species are to be feared, controlled, and eliminated, but also which actors are responsible. This is where the law comes in: the regulation exerts a disciplinary force over municipalities, landowners, citizens, and landscapes. This is, of course, what is expected of a regulation. But in doing so, it disciplines behaviour and sets expectations and boundaries for what is possible, necessary, appropriate, and inappropriate. Thus, the regulation and its list also echo the monster’s task of policing the borders of the possible (Cohen 1996). In enumerating invasive alien species, it seeks to tame the overwhelming multiplicity of ecological entanglements, recasting the unruly as clearly defined threats. In this sense, the regulating complex both warns against unfamiliar species and, more literally, cautions against geographical transgression.

Patchwork and Disharmony

We basically took the most obvious candidates. And it wasn't particularly scientific. Rather, it was like... Everyone's screaming about lupins, Japanese knotweed, and Canadian goldenrod. Okay, we'll include them and list them. Then we had signals from management here that we shouldn't list too many species. They preferably wanted to list five. Now we have thirteen. I resisted a bit. (Representative, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, interview 2023)

This remark, made by a representative from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, captures a central point of contention in the regulatory framework: which threatening species are to be included, and why? For years, this question has occupied actors through inquiries, classifications, risk assessments, and consultations. Many papers could be written solely on the selection of who to include on such a national blacklist. Here, however, we focus on some recurring themes raised by actors, especially those illuminating the hybrid traits of the list (cf. Cohen 1996).

From our material emerges a legislation perceived as an artificial mixture, created through a hotchpotch of species, actors, categories, and disparate elements, with many ambiguities, exceptions, and variations in responsibility and management. Several actors highlight the mixture of ecological, socio-economic, political, and practical concerns that shape the regulation and its list of species. General discourse, free trade agreements and commercial interests, the availability and cost-effectiveness of control methods, and shifting risk assessments all appear to have left their mark. It becomes a bricolage, reflecting bargains, unclear priorities, and accumulated pressures. The patchwork of species, rules, exceptions, and overlapping jurisdictions turns the regulation into a hybrid creature: partly legal text, partly ecological governance, partly political compromise. Its hybridity produces contradictions, as it promises control while generating risks of confusion and inaction. Just as monstrous hybridity combines disparate elements into unsettling new forms, so too does the regulatory framework.

It also becomes clear that actors make different assessments regarding how the list and regulation should look and why, and argue that more, or other, species ought to be listed. In an interview with two representatives of the National Federation of Recreational Gardening in 2024, respondents spoke about their members' frustration over the species chosen, and how the legislation lumps together diverse species as threats without considering local ecological realities.

Other concerns emerge. Both experts and private individuals struggle to distinguish different species from each other – which is the native one? – and to keep up with puzzling variations and hybridisations, making some of the threatening species hard to pin down in words:

Well, there are difficult things when it comes to taxonomy [...] I mean, goldfish. What is that? Is it a species if they interbreed, if they hybridise? I mean, what is it really? This name that appears on this list, what does it relate to? (Representative, Species Information Centre, interview, 2024)

What appears on paper as established and simple facts, a stable, given catalogue of threats ready to be regulated, is in practice something fluid and complex. Species hybridise, definitions shift, the world changes. The legislation, fixed in language and configuration, may become locked in its own documentation. What happens when the name of a regulated species changes – does this mean it is no longer on the list and regulated? As an interviewed representative of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2023) asked: “Well, what have we then listed?”

As a hybrid, the regulation and its list, similar to Cohen’s monster, meld categories and create new boundaries. In its attempts to stabilise and reinforce the order of its categories, it exposes the instabilities of classifications, showing how legal attempts to fix ‘invasive’ identity are constantly undermined by the flux of the world. Interviews and consultation responses repeatedly show that the regulating complex can become a confusing montage, difficult to control and comprehend, overwhelming to keep track of and act upon.

The Unclear and Ambiguous

Let’s stay with the ominous ambiguity. Monsters lurk in the ambiguous and the uncertain. This is part of why they are frightening. This is a recurring worry regarding the emerging regulation. Many actors highlight uncertainties about responsibility – who should control, eradicate, or manage species, and how this should be coordinated.

Conceptual ambiguities deepen this unease. Actors, like the County administrative boards in Västernorrland and Dalarna (consultation responses 2025), point to unclear formulations: Does “intentionally releasing into the environment” include leaving seeds behind? And how can this be controlled? How to distinguish “cultivating” from “allowing to grow”? Does dispersal to a neighbour count as a new or existing population?

The County Administrative Board in Skåne illustrates a paradox:

The legislation can be interpreted as making it illegal to make a pie from Japanese knotweed or marmalade from Beach rose hips whilst it will be legal to possess and allow the species to passively spread to new property owners and valuable nature. (Consultation response 2025: 3)

Such contradictions make the framework appear paradoxical and difficult to interpret. Its ambiguity is a recurring fear in the consultation responses, and many raise concerns about its possible harmful effects. However, like Cohen's monster that "always escapes", the regulating complex too is slippery: even as species are added or measures refined, new ambiguities arise, as the two consultation rounds show. The list will never be complete. Each attempt at closure produces further gaps and contradictions, ensuring the survival of the monstrous.

There is also another fear haunting the entire regulating complex, born not from what is seen in the proposed documents, but from what lurks in the unknown future. For years, the actors we have interviewed or encountered in consultation rounds have waited for the finalisation of the regulation and its list. They know that something is approaching – a presence moving, swimming, creeping just beneath the surface – yet its form remains blurred, its contours uncertain, its eventual force unknowable. The regulation could offer help, but it is not yet proven. The regulation hovers like a half-seen creature, already sensed but not yet revealed, instilling dread through its very indeterminacy.

Colossus of Inadequacy

A recurring danger raised, particularly from municipalities and county administrative boards, is that the law's practical consequences will be resource-wise and operationally overwhelming and boundless, with an imminent risk of acceleration. The problems with invasive species are predicted to increase over time, and the entire machinery surrounding their management will expand accordingly. Several county boards illustrate this in the consultation responses (2024, 2025) through long lists of tasks – inventory, supervision, restoration, eradication – an endless litany multiplying like tentacles. Here, just like the monstrous – appearing too large, too powerful, too unruly, 'overabundant' (Carroll 1990) – the regulating complex is feared for being too much.

In one response, Skåne County Administrative Board notes the appetite of the regulating complex: "In Skåne alone, [regulating] the Japanese knotweed that stands along roads and watercourses in hundreds of populations on state and municipal land would swallow the entire county's annual budget for measures against invasive alien species." (consultation response 2025: 4). The same anxiety is voiced in an interview:

It's a problem that I don't really know how we're going to solve. When Japanese Knotweed comes on that [the list], it's going to be chaos. [...] I actually don't know how we're going to solve it. Probably I'll turn off my phone for a few months. (Representative, County Administrative Board in Skåne, interview, 2024)

The regulation's ambitions are repeatedly described as exceeding the capacity of those trying to handle it: it risks becoming something with limited teeth for its intended purpose while creating "unreasonable consequences" (The Swedish Bar Association, consultation response, 2025: 2) for implementers. The fear is of a regulation devouring organisational resources and competing with other environmental tasks. The burden on regional and local authorities is most emphasised, though the weight placed on private landowners also recurs. This concern has eased somewhat in the 2025 updated regulation compared to 2024, as private individuals were exempted from much of the law's demands. Yet this adjustment, like a hydra, only spawned new worries.

Preventing the spread of all proposed species demands extensive administration and physical labour. Because it involves living entities that grow, move, reproduce, and linger in soil as seeds or fragments, efforts are rarely one-off. To prevent the spread requires years of digging, cutting, and killing. Actors stress the exhausting relentlessness of this work and the importance of not destroying those held responsible. Here, the regulating complex's monstrous nature reveals itself not only in scope but in its effect on those tasked with implementation, looming as a devouring presence that feeds on their time, energy, and hope.

County boards, municipalities, and landowners fear being overwhelmed – like confronting a creature whose size and appetite exceed all capacity to resist. In interviews and consultation responses (2024, 2025), actors repeatedly emphasise that the management required is presented as feasible without extra resources, despite agencies' environmental budgets already being stretched thin. Personnel and financial shortages make the complex difficult, if not impossible, to master. Concerns are raised about undesirable consequences following like a tail. One might speak of a melancholy of implementation – a hopelessness born in the realisation of gaps between need, intention, and possibility.

Above, we mentioned the imminent risk of acceleration. Invasive species and the lists meant to contain them will only increase. This means an expansion of what the regulatory framework must manage and an escalation of the problems this colossus might create. Interviews and consultation responses convey a creeping dread: each new species added, each procedural ambiguity, swells the regulatory body, like flesh accumulating on an amorphous giant, producing a boundless bureaucratic monstrosity.

Part of this darker cloud concerns future difficulties in engaging the public and the risk of the list becoming a conflict machine. As a representative from the private gardening sphere pinpoints, problems may grow when species deeply tied to cultural history become subject to regulation:

If lilacs were to be listed, or some of these early spring bulb plants [...] Daffodils and squills. If they were to be banned and you had to remove them, then I think we would have had a completely different debate [...]. Then they [garden owners, the public] will find it a bit harder to see. [...] Those which we connect to memories, the lilac arbour where we have sat... (Representative, National Federation of Recreational Gardening, interview, 2024)

Consultation responses and interviews thus highlight the regulating complex's operational monstrosity. Local and regional authorities feel overburdened: monitoring, eradicating, restoring, and managing invasive species devour resources, often beyond capacity. The law risks consuming more time and money than is available, creating a sense of hopelessness and inevitable failure. Once again, we are reminded that a monster tells what is good and to be done, and what is not, as it polices the borders of the possible (Cohen 1996).

Yet the material also resonates with Cohen's insight into the mingling of dread and desire. Despite fear and frustration, actors are drawn to the clarity and order the regulating complex promises – or could promise. It is spoken of as necessary, even inevitable, but with a long shadow. It both terrifies and attracts: a fantasy of control in an unpredictable ecological world, even as its bulk and appetite may devour those who must live with it.

Fear of Hopelessness, Grim Consequences and Slowness

A basic characteristic of a monster is that it threatens and brings fear. The regulation of invasive species likewise produces fear (and the whole complex is, after all, rooted in fear of the invasive threat). A major concern voiced by regional and local authorities and environmental organisations in their consultation responses is that the 2025 regulation proposal introduces exceptions, removing much responsibility and work from private individuals and companies.

On paper, these may appear minor adjustments, but in practice, they risk, in many actors' eyes, turning the regulation into something ineffective, hopeless, and even counterproductive. The County Administrative Board in Dalarna warns: "The species exist extensively on private land and on commercial properties and will, according to the proposal for the regulation, be allowed to spread unhindered and passively to new properties and also retake areas where eradication measures have been carried out" (consultation response 2025: 2).

Similar fear is raised by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation's consultation response (2025: 3), who argue, like several others, that the regulation deteriorated during its drafting process:

In the now circulated proposal, only state and municipal actors should bear this [eradication] responsibility, whilst private individuals and companies are exempted. We see this as a serious problem [...]. If efforts are only carried out within certain areas whilst others are left without action, the work risks becoming ineffective and ultimately failing.

Thus emerges a fear of a dismal situation where hard and costly efforts are undermined by exceptions. Many note that species will continue to spread regardless of human boundaries, “since the species do not care about property boundaries” (Gothenburg Municipality, consultation response 2025: 1). The regulating complex thus risks becoming a fantasy creature: imposing on paper but impotent in doing what it was meant to do.

There are also fears that the legislation will not only fail but generate new problems. By increasing the number of species to combat, some authorities warn they may lose control over species currently managed (e.g. County Administrative Board in Norrbotten, consultation response 2025). Similar concerns surface interviews:

And especially if we get a national list in place, then many of the species that are a problem, they will become even bigger problems, so to speak... Because then you have to do something about it. (Representative, National Federation of Recreational Gardening, interview, 2024)

Other fears haunt the regulation and its list. Actors worry it will become sluggish and static, lacking preparedness for the future. The constant need to update the list and to work flexibly is stressed repeatedly. Here, tensions arise between urgent needs for action and slow administrative processes. Consultation instances call for mechanisms for rapid additions to the national list or swift measures against ominous “door-knocker species”, along with regular updates aligned with new risk assessments as climate or knowledge change (e.g. Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, consultation response 2025). Tensions thus emerge when two opposing temperaments are stitched together: the stability of a fixed regulatory framework and the restless dynamism of ecology and society. There is a fear of an anachronistic regulation – a system regulating yesterday instead of today.

The sluggishness is also echoed in interviews. A biology expert at the Species Information Centre described frustration at how “interest in these issues [invasive species]... and nature conservation generally has not been so great, so it has not been... felt high priority” (interview, 2023), resulting in long delays. Several interviewees interpret this as a symptom of weak political commitment. At the same time, many express temporal desperation: efforts are described as urgent, even

overdue. Thus, a tension emerges between the need for rapid action to tame fast, shape-shifting monsters of invasive species, and the slow, lumbering movements of the monstrous colossus of the regulating complex, a creature so heavy it risks collapsing under its own weight.

Concluding Discussion: A Perfect Monster

The regulating complex highlighted in this article concerns a changing world. Managing invasive species is one of the many ways in which climate change and threats to biodiversity are translated into practical difficulties and challenges controlled through regulations, and in this specific case, through listings. Monster theory has helped to clarify the difficulties such regulation faces and articulate them.

Invasive alien species are marked by a doubleness of novelty: they are new as organisms in the landscape and new as a cultural category given salience through science, media and policy. As Stuart Hall (1980) reminds us, cultural “newness” always builds upon what is already familiar. For something to be recognised as novel, it must be both strange and intelligible. This duality might help explain why invasive species so readily assume monstrous qualities: they are defined in opposition to cherished and familiar native species, which appear fragile, beautiful, and worthy of protection. By contrast, invasive species are cast as excessive and expendable.

This article has shown how invasive alien species are framed through the language and imaginaries of monstrosity, both in public discourse and in everyday encounters. Organisms such as Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed, and the killer slug have come to embody fears of excess and disorder in conjunction with ecological change and disruption. Analysing these anxieties through Cohen’s monster lens has made it possible to show that this mirrors broader contemporary concerns about environmental change and human vulnerability. We have also shown that the culturally constructed monstrosity of the species follows them as they enter into legal jurisdiction. The regulating complex created to contain them, starting with the EU directives, interpreted through the lens of the Swedish context, to ultimately materialise in a concrete list, also emerges as hybrid and unruly. In seeking to stabilise, the list generates confusion, contradictions, and an expanding bureaucratic machinery that is itself experienced as overwhelming. To put it bluntly: it operates both as a *monster list* naming certain species as threats, and as a *list monster*, a bureaucratic entity that grows and produces unintended consequences. In this way, the regulatory apparatus mirrors the very qualities of the species it seeks to govern: excessive, ambiguous, and resistant to containment.

This dynamic is not all unique to invasive species governance. Some of

the monstrous characters of the regulation of unruly nature can also be seen in regulatory frameworks generally. Recent research shows that regulatory frameworks – especially in environmental and social policy – are expanding rapidly (Hinterleitner et al. 2021). The trend, described through concepts like “policy accumulation” (Adam et al. 2019), reveals a wider institutional tendency toward hypertrophy, in which legislative ambition outpaces administrative capacity. The result may be bureaucratic overload and declining policy effectiveness (Limberg et al. 2021, Fernández-i-Marín et al. 2024) as authorities struggle to keep what they are tasked to regulate in check. Yet when what is being governed is not just “unruly” but living organisms that do not respond to or even register these proliferating rules, the sense of expansion, hopelessness, and elusiveness seems to become even more accentuated.

We have shown that invasive alien species are often perceived as monsters. In analogy with monster theory, the work of the authorities is about taming the invasive monster. In the same way, it can be argued that the regulatory framework itself becomes an unmanageable monster, which in turn needs to be tamed. A clear example is the protracted process of developing the national list, where each step, in a hydra-like manner, generates its own cycle of investigation and negotiation.

Taken together, and in line with Cohen’s thinking, we would, if we may be a bit bold, propose that the species and regulation together form *a perfect monster* of our time. This hybrid figure is simultaneously biological and bureaucratic, material and symbolic. It is the knotweed breaking through asphalt and the regulations and legal texts multiplying in response; the killer slug devouring crops and the administrative burden consuming local resources. It condenses contemporary fears of ecological collapse, bureaucratic immobility, and the loss of control in an age of environmental uncertainty. Just as earlier societies’ anxieties about unruly nature took the shape of folkloric beings with features from both the natural *and* the human worlds, today’s monster lends it cultural body to invasive alien species *and* the governance structures surrounding them.

The perfection of this monster lies in its doubleness. It is neither only a living organism nor only a regulatory apparatus, but an assemblage of the two. It is the entanglement of human and non-human actors, ecological excess and bureaucratic excess that makes it exemplary of the monstrous in the present moment. Like Frankenstein’s creature, the regulatory complex is stitched together from disparate elements such as concrete management of nature, popular imaginaries, scientific knowledge, political priorities, legal frameworks, and economic calculations. And in the same way, it acquires a life beyond the control of its creators: it is too much, overwhelming in scope, costly in implementation, and perpetually returning.

The temporal dimension underscores this hybridity. The very definition of invasive alien species relies on a historically set boundary: in Sweden, species

established before 1800 are deemed native, while those arriving later are classified as alien. Such thresholds naturalise cultural and political decisions, producing categories that appear self-evident but are contingent and unstable. The lists, in other words, not only police ecological boundaries but temporal ones, deciding which species belong to the past and which are cast as present-day threats.

In this sense, *the perfect monster* of our time is not a singular entity but a complex. It materialises in gardens, forests, and infrastructures, where invasive species disrupt human projects, and in offices and legislation, where proliferating rules and lists overwhelm those tasked with their enforcement. It is simultaneously feared and desired: feared for its uncontrollability and its appetite for resources, desired for the promise of clarity and control it seems to offer. It fascinates even as it terrifies, embodying Cohen's (1996) insight that monsters always escape, always return, and always reflect ourselves and our time. In a broader political discourse, it sometimes also includes even more troubling articulations, connecting ecological change with xenophobic ideas that also concern humans.

Invasive alien species thus illuminate how monstrosity functions as a cultural lens in the present ecological moment. They show how threats are imagined, managed, and contested, and how boundaries - between native and alien, nature and culture, past and present - are drawn and redrawn. As Cohen reminds us, monsters are our children. Invasive alien species and the regulatory assemblages surrounding them are no exception. They are products of cultivation, commerce, and governance - of human mobility, desire, and intervention. What we now reject is, very much like Frankenstein's creation, our own monster.

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- Representative, County Administrative Board in Dalarna, interview, December 12, 2017
- Representative, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, interview, November 27, 2023
- Representative, Species Information Centre, interview, December 12, 2023
- Representative, County Administrative Board in Skåne, interview, January 19, 2024
- Representative, Species information Centre, interview, April 17, 2024
- Representative, National Federation of Recreational Gardening, interview, May 5, 2024
- Retired researcher, The Institute of Freshwater Research, interview, February 12, 2025

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