WEEDS

by Kara Dohrenwend

Noxious weeds, also called invasive exotic species, environmental weeds, or non-natives, are rapidly taking over vast areas of public lands. The simplest definition of a weed is "a plant out of place." If you have a garden you are probably familiar with weeds, their impact on the productivity of your garden, and how difficult it can be to get rid of them. Familiar range weeds include Russian thistle, cheat grass, tamarisk, Russian olive, and knapweed. Some of these plants have beautiful flowers and are often sold as landscaping plants.

Noxious weeds are those that are particularly tenacious and do not eventually stabilize within the native plant mosaic. Plants such as these have become so commonplace that many of us cannot recall that these plants haven't always grown here and therefore we accept them as "belonging". Jerry Asher, a weed specialist for the BLM in Oregon, estimates that every day noxious weeds are spreading over approximately 7 square miles (roughly twice the size of the incorporated parts of the City of Moab) of public lands in the United States. 25,000 square miles in a year!

The ability of noxious weeds to out compete native species is hardly a "natural" occurrence or an example of "nature doing its thing". Most of the noxious weed species have been introduced by people for ornamental plantings, erosion control, food, or by accident. Although it may appear impossible to do anything about weeds, the prospect of simply living with them is not benign. In the desert the side canyons and springs are particularly important areas where it is possible to thwart the progress of these weed species. In riparian areas the most commonly seen weeds are Russian olives and tamarisk. In some places, such as Desolation Canyon, there are so few of these plants that it would be relatively easy to remove them before they take over larger areas. As Gary Cramer, a former weed control specialist at the University of Arizona, contends about simply living with weeds along streams and rivers, "This is down in the riparian areas—some of the most valuable areas of the Southwest....Can we simply accept that the cottonwoods, the willows will be eliminated?"

Over time the cottonwood/willow riparian forest can vanish amongst the olive/tamarisk thickets, although in some places the willows do seem to be making a comeback. Russian olives and tamarisk support approximately one third of the bird species supported by native cottonwood-willow communities. Although some native species eat the olive fruit and may nest in olives or tamarisks, some birds that nest in tamarisk are being found to not reproduce well. For instance, in parts of southern Arizona the endangered southwest willow flycatcher is nesting in tamarisk trees where they have no alternative nesting sites, but researchers are finding their eggs are not hatching. They speculate this may kill the eggs because of the higher ambient temperature during the hot parts of the day in a tamarisk thicket compared to the slightly cooler temperatures in a willow thicket.

In late February (2000) the Utah Weed Control Association held their annual conference in Moab. Weed control supervisors from every county in Utah, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Utah State University students and professors, and a few other non-governmental people attended the conference. Although the majority of the weed control methods discussed involved chemical treatments and biological controls the fact that so many people were talking about ways to address the problem was heartening. A common theme of the discussion was the need for more people to be involved in looking for, mapping, and removing weeds in the wild lands of the Colorado Plateau. With more hands at work more environmentally friendly methods might be able to be used to begin to remove them. In the next few issues of *The Confluence* there will be articles about specific weeds and the native plants they are replacing, and how as river guides you might be able to help locate and begin to remove these species before they spread further.

SOURCES:

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Russian knapweed is found at the Little Dolores River camp in Westwater. Flowers of this perennial are pinkish-purple.