

I Don't Like Picking up Hitchhikers

An interesting thing happened to me the other day. I had just arrived back home from a two week vacation in Hawaii. Hawaii, you might know, has the highest number of introduced plants in the nation. It also has the highest number of threatened and extinct species in the nation (probably as a result of all of the introduced species).

I had taken an additional day off from work to help myself acclimate to eastern daylight time and to basically get my act together. One of the tasks I attempted that day - which I thought would be within my limited mental ability - was to clean my hiking boots. My wife and I had taken several fantastic hikes into and around the Hawaiian volcanoes and our boots were covered with red dirt. As I brushed my boots, I noticed several seed heads attached to the fabric just inside my boot. As I struggled to get them to release themselves from the fabric of the boots, I noticed the sharp structural features that make them such good hitchhikers. They were long and slender with an

extremely sharp tip and numerous serrations along one side from end to end. I was finally able to detach them, and

I started to toss them out into the yard with all of the other "green stuff."

About that time, my one remaining brain synapse fired. I spoke to myself saying, "David," I always call myself David. I said "David, if you let these things loose in your yard, you may just find that they like it here." I took a slow look around my yard and noticed the stump of the camphor tree that I had recently cut down and treated; the periwinkles just showing their new little leaves - still coming up after 9 years of my periwinkle eradication project; the Caesar weed that I have fought for 20 years; the bahia grass I have just started removing; and several other species that I am too embarrassed to mention that I have planted in my yard.

On the other hand, I said "David, if you just toss them into the yard and they really like it here, you may be able to start an entire new industry." What if the grass is attractive? The nursery industry might want to promote it as a new ornamental. Or maybe cows would like to eat it. Or maybe it will become such a nuisance that the pesticide industry would have to develop an entirely new herbicide to keep it under control. At any rate, I could help create lots of jobs and really help the economy.

It was kind of interesting that as I was leaving Hawaii, my luggage was closely scrutinized in an attempt to keep agricultural pests from being introduced into the mainland. Seems it is illegal to bring in any fruit or vegetable (unless specifically packaged) because it may have soil microbes, or insects hitchhiking along. Certain plants were certified "pest free." I don't know how anything could possibly impact the agribusiness more than the thousands of microbes, insects, and weeds that we already have here now. Hell, I don't know how anything like that could possibly survive anywhere around an intensively managed agriculture site. These crops are continuously dusted, sprayed, tilled, drained, flooded, or all of the above to ensure that only the designated crop is produced. Yet all of the laws seem to be set up to protect this end of the business. "And it's a damn good thing, David." I added.

However, I could bring back hundreds of specifically packaged exotic plants as long as they didn't have soil or insects attached to them. Several of the species that I could have brought back to the mainland are certainly considered pests. Particularly because several agencies of the State and I, have been trying to remove these exotic plants from our properties for years. The nursery and agriculture industry continue to deny that many of these species are pests. I guess these plants must sell well in the trade or can't live in intensely managed agricultural areas; therefore, they are not pests.

So, I will climb down off of my soapbox and stop my rambling, and get back to the point of this story, which is the final fate of the four seed heads that I held in the palm of my hand. I took the seed heads and walked over to my workbench, placing them neatly on the surface. I got a hammer and pounded the seeds to dust. I then brought in a bale of hay, a gallon of gas, and set fire to my shed and let it burn to the ground just to keep them from escaping into the wild. "That should do it, David," I mused. All this because, I don't like picking up hitchhikers. - David Girardin.

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