Dandelion Sundae: an opportunity to learn about invasive plant species

by Toby Burke

The exotic or non-native plant persisting in your back yard lawn may not be as benign as you think. It may have the potential to escape and become an invasive plant affecting not only our urban landscape but the larger landscape as well. Accordingly, natural resource agencies and local citizens are becoming increasingly concerned about non-native, invasive plants and the many problems they pose for native flora and fauna and the quality life we residents often take for granted here on the Kenai Peninsula.

While not all non-native plants are necessarily invasive more than a few are and they can cause irreparable harm to an ecosystem and its constituent parts. Invasive plants can adversely alter natural ecological processes. They may be capable of causing major, possibly irreversible, alteration or disruption of these processes by altering geomorphology, hydrology, or fire regimes. They can adversely alter natural community structure by changing the density of a layer of vegetation, creating a new layer, or eliminating one or more layers. They can adversely alter natural community composition resulting in the extirpation of one or more native species, reducing biodiversity or changing the community composition towards species exotic to the natural community. They can adversely alter higher trophic levels impacting animals, fungi, microbes, and other organisms in the community it invades. More specifically they can alter geomorphologic patterns by increasing erosion by thinning or eliminating native plants that once formed a dense layer of roots holding sediments in place. Or conversely they can completely cover sediments that were naturally unvegetated. They can alter hydrological patterns by changing stream flow and sedimentation rates. They can change water chemistry and accelerate the eutrophication of lacustrine waters (lakes and ponds), fluviate waters (streams and rivers), and even marine (coastal) waters. They can change fire regimes by altering fire frequency, severity, and spatial distribution. They can change the entire structure of plant and animal communities. They can extirpate species or populations of species and reduce biodiversity. They can also be unpalatable to domestic livestock and some aquatic invasives can physically clog lakes and streams impeding navigation. The list goes on and on.

The ubiquitous and exotic dandelion, found on the margins of roads, trails, sidewalks, driveways, parking lots, campgrounds, and in lawns has become the "poster child" for invasive plants. Like many invasive plant species they readily colonize disturbed areas and can often be difficult if not impossible to eradicate once established in the botanical community. This plant is probably the most familiar invasive we have on the Kenai Peninsula, and it can serve to introduce concerned citizens to a larger cadre of invasive plants especially ones likely to be encountered locally.

Thus, on Sunday June 4th, from 1-4 pm, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge along with the Kenai Watershed Forum and the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service will host "Dandelion Sundae" at the Refuge Visitor Center in Soldotna. Come rain or shine and bring a grocery-sized bag of dandelions plants, or just their flowers and seed heads, and any other invasive plants that you can readily identify and remove. Give us your bag of invasives and the general location where they were removed and you will receive a free ice cream sundae.

Prizes will be awarded for the most sensitive removal sites (i.e. streamsides, trailheads etc.), family totals, and most plants with roots intact. Come and listen to informative presentations and receive free invasive plant guides to aid in the future removal and mapping of locations of plants such as Canada and Bull Thistle, Common Tansy, Toadflax, Oxeye Daisy, Narrowleaf Hawksbeard, Orange hawkweed, Hempnettle, Bird Vetch, White Sweetclover and others. Become informed and contribute to the effort to prevent and control the spread of invasive plants in your community and adjacent wildlands. For further event details or recommendations on where to go "weed pulling" contact Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021, Josselyn Burke at the Kenai Watershed Forum 260-5449, or Janice Chumley at the University of Alaska Fairbanks

Cooperative Extension Service 262-5824.

Toby Burke is a biological technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in invasive plant surveys for the refuge and he will be one of the hosts of Dandelion Sundae. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/.