

## FOREWORD

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To date, South America has largely ignored the presence and impacts of invasive alien species on biodiversity and natural systems. This needs to change as the South American continent has more to lose than most other regions as it is home to more than 20% of the planet's species. The region also has the best share of natural habitat left in the world.

Although to lay eyes these are often just another plant or animal, invasive alien species are everywhere: from rats in our urban areas to species such as the giant African snail and African grasses in the most remote spots deep in the Amazon rain forest. Insufficient assessments have been undertaken to enable us to understand how large the problem really is. In the meantime, public programs continue to foster the cultivation of new non-native species through new introductions and re-introductions. This reflects a lack of scientific knowledge, as well as a lack of common sense in dealing with natural ecosystems under the Precautionary Principle as prescribed by the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Damage to natural ecosystems, especially when invasive alien species are part of the process, is usually irreversible. Consequences go far beyond the availability of financial resources to fix these problems: they create long-lasting impacts and can lead to extinction, so the best alternative is still to avoid creating them in the first place.

Few countries in the world have taken serious action to prevent the expanding problem of invasive species. South America needs to learn from these experiences. Countries need to act fast to stop new introductions. They need to:

- build risk assessment processes that include environmental elements
- establish efficient prevention systems
- create rapid response capacity upon early detection of invasive species, and
- develop legal frameworks to appropriately deal with different species in natural and in production systems.

These efforts can only lead to positive results if linked to raising awareness at all levels, from public knowledge to scientific expertise. This publication is part of a popular series of GISP booklets focusing on invaded regions across the globe, and is not intended as a technical book containing complete lists of all invasive species in South America. Rather, it gives an overview of the problem facing our Continent, highlighting some of the more serious and widespread invaders. Of course there are many more invasive species present across South America and we hope that this publication will make policy makers and managers alike more aware of the scale and spread of the problem.

We also hope that readers will understand that this massive invasion can only be dealt with if there is public cooperation at all levels. We need citizens not to carry plants or seeds around, not to cultivate invasive species, not to release pets into the wild. We need producers to control the invasive species they occasionally cultivate, and to find alternatives compatible with long-term sustainability. Many solutions are available, simple and cheap in technical terms, but complex when human interests are involved especially because of a general lack of knowledge and respect for biodiversity. We'd like this book to have at least a little effect on your vision of nature and of the future, and on your understanding that you can also help prevent the loss of precious species and ecosystem functions and services.

Dr. Silvia R. Ziller  
Executive Director, The Horus Institute, Brazil  
Coordinator, South America Invasive Species Program, The Nature Conservancy