

Spanning the Gap

Aliens Invade Park!



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Spanning the Gap
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Non-native plants or "exotics" are invading Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area at a visually alarming rate causing serious threat to the integrity and biodiversity of park landscapes. Invasive exotics are aggressive and spread like wildfire into undisturbed as well as disturbed areas. These invasive plants often cause irreparable damage to natural resources. Although vast fields of flowers, such as *purple loosestrife*, may look attractive, many of these plants are actually silent, green invaders, slowly destroying the native, living natural heritage the parks are mandated to preserve.

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area is impacted in many ways. Within the park, known exotic species number 241 plants and 28 animals. In natural areas, invasive plants reduce habitat for native and endangered species, degrade riparian areas, overtake native grasslands and scenic areas and can interfere with recreational activities. Aquatic invasive plants threaten the ecological balance of the river. In developed areas, invasive plants can take over a disturbed landscape, (trail openings, powerlines, agricultural lands, homesites, bridge replacement areas, road widening projects, culvert replacements), crowding out more desirable species so that additional maintenance is required. Examples of this invasion include the *Japanese knotweed* surrounds an agricultural field just north of Toms Creek. *Autumn olive*, *tartarian honeysuckle* and *multiflora rose* are closing in fields along Old Mine Road in New Jersey. *Purple loosestrife* is choking wetlands parkwide and threatening rare plant communities along the Delaware River. One of



Ailanthus altissima, or Tree of Heaven.



Ailanthus altissima, or Tree of Heaven (detail.)



the most aggressive exotics in the recreation area is *Ailanthus altissima*, the Tree of Heaven. It spreads by seed, root suckers and stump sprouts. Cutting of mature trees encourages new growth and expansion of populations. It is difficult to control.

Managing invasive exotics requires a three-prong approach. We must have effective prevention, effective control, and effective restoration to be successful. Invasives that are already here must be prevented from infesting new areas. We should be eradicating new infestations and containing large infestations. We must expand and improve on systems for detecting, reporting and monitoring new infestations of invasive plants. We must convince others to use native species for ornamental and conservation purposes. Most importantly, we must make a conscious effort to restore disturbed areas to prevent reinvasion by exotics.

Japanese knotweed.



Purple loosestife.

NPS Photos by Larry Hilaire.