

WE MUST EAT THE...

ALIEN
INVADERS!



...TO ENSURE OUR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
(AND BEFORE THEY EAT US!)

WORDS FARIDA IQBAL DESIGN RENEW ILLUSTRATION ANDI PERMANA PUTRA/ISTOCKPHOTO

It's true. We should eat the alien invaders if we want to live a life of glory in the post-apocalypse. We need to eat them quickly and we need to eat them now.

I don't mean "alien" as in "from outer space". I mean "alien" as in "not from here".

And I'm not talking about human migrants, oh no. Nobody needs to eat them. They're having a hard enough time as is.

I'm talking about innumerable invasive species that are wreaking untold havoc upon Australia's delicate ecology. I'm talking about impertinent fungi. Insubordinate plant life. Truculent oysters. And the cane toads. Yes, the cane toads.

I've reached the limits of the vocabulary that my thesaurus can offer to describe such unruly beasts. At this point I should offer an official disclaimer.

Disclaimer: I am not a scientist in any way, shape or form. I have zero qualifications in botany, mycology, zoology or any related fields. I'm just a deranged forager. The things are invading the landscape. I am eating the things because I am unemployed and they happen to be free food. Now just wait a second while I adjust my tin foil hat to maximise reception.

Now, that's better.

The point I'm trying to make is that a lot of introduced species are edible. In fact a lot of them are not just edible. They are *delectable*. I'm talking about fresh dates straight off the tree, trout, mushrooms that cost \$150 a kilogram if you pay for them ... Delicacies that you can't even buy with money are invading the land and sea.

Oh, and some of them contain psychedelic drugs. I'm not just talking about the various mushrooms that have become so fashionable recently. The Hawaiian baby woodrose has psychoactive compounds in it that are related to LSD. It is a declared environmental weed in Northern Queensland. Syrian rue is like the ayahuasca vine only more potent. [More?! – Ed.] It is invading farm land in South Australia.

History and context

Anyway, before we get stuck into a good meal and/or drug bender, let's take a look at some history and context. It wasn't just

white people who invaded Australia from 1788 onwards: with those invaders came an invasion of their plants, animals and fungi, all of which were introduced in response to a perceived lack of native equivalents. But there was nothing wrong with this continent's plants, animals or fungi in the first place. (And there was definitely nothing wrong with the people.)

Safe foraging

We'd never want to discourage anyone from foraging, but you *should* be scared of eating anything about which you're not 110% sure. Research, double-check, research some more, do things like spore prints and edibility tests. Double-check the results. Ask people who know what they're talking about. And be aware of how to access assistance if you need it.

Poisons Information Centre

On that last point, one important resource is the Poisons Information Centre, which operates 24/7. (You can also call it if someone has overdosed, taken medications they shouldn't have, or been stung or bitten by a venomous animal.)

The number to call is **13 11 26**. Callers who do not speak English can call via the translating and interpreting service on **13 14 50**.

There are situations in which you *shouldn't* call the hotline: if someone has collapsed, stopped breathing, or is having a seizure or anaphylactic reaction, you should call **000** for an ambulance in the first instance.

However, Australia's native flora and fauna were dismissed by the invaders, and they remain unfairly and unnecessarily stigmatised. Many native Australian plants are super-tasty superfoods—but few of the people who live here now even think of those plants as food.

Those plants, however, are under increasing threat from introduced species,

many of which now dominate their new ecosystems. Some of those plants got here by accident but shamefully, many were brought over on purpose. Many invasive weeds arrived here as ornamental garden plants; seeds don't care much about borders, so they jumped the garden fence and now they're out of control.

Similarly, in the 19th century all kinds of species were brought over here with carefree abandon. Here's one example that shows the stupidity of the colonial mindset: in 1862, the Governor of Victoria Sir Henry Barker proposed that monkeys should be introduced to Australia's forests "for the amusement of wayfarers, whom their gambols would delight."

Great! Let's introduce a new species into the delicate ecology of this continent. Not for food. Not for transport. Not for anything useful. Let's do it purely because rich white people are *bored* with the forest. Never mind that monkeys haven't evolved to digest Eucalyptus. Never mind any damn thing. This particular plan, at least, didn't get approval—I guess it was so stupid that even the 19th-century authorities could see there were problems with it.

Many other ridiculous plans to introduce new species, however, did get approval. Another example: while he wasn't the first person to introduce rabbits to Australia, the current plague is the result of the release of 24 wild rabbits by one Thomas Austin, who lived near Geelong in the 1850s. In 1859, he released these rabbits so he could shoot them for fun, proclaiming, "The introduction of a few rabbits could do little harm and might provide ... a spot of hunting." Austin clearly couldn't hit the backside of a barn with a banjo, let alone a rabbit with a shotgun, because his "few rabbits" bred like ... well, rabbits, and are now a flopsy-mopsy infestation that has eaten multiple native species out of existence.

The ecological damage is incalculable.

Global warming

In addition to the invasive species problem, we now also face the effects of global warming caused by increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which will mean drastic



Image: Rick Starr/NOAA Photo Library/Flickr

Poor Danforth was able to capture only this singular, blasphemous image of great Cthulhu returning to the cyclopean depths before he ran screaming and laughing into the—what? Oh, sorry: this is a Humboldt squid off the coast of California.

changes to temperature and rainfall and increased frequency of extreme weather events. These challenging conditions favour hardy plants with short life-spans—which means it is likely to make invasive weeds even more invasive.

These are, after all, the kind of plants that don't need much to survive. The kind of plants that can live in a crack in the footpath with no encouragement from humans. The kind of plants that in fact survive active discouragement from humans. Not your sensitive agricultural plants that faint at the mere sight of a slug. Global warming does not favour plants that need mollycoddling. While we contemplate the terror of the looming climate apocalypse, the humble dandelion prepares to inherit a new Earth.

When I talk about “weeds”, I'm not just talking about plants. There are also animal weeds. My favourite one is the Humboldt squid of the North Pacific Ocean. It is a Lovecraftian horror ferocious ocean predator that grows to around the size of a person. It has been known to attack humans.

It can't crush bone, but it can do some serious lacerating, because the suckers on its tentacles have teeth.

Up until recently, the Humboldt squid and the human race have lived comfortably in non-overlapping environments. The Humboldt squid lives 200m to 700m below sea level, which is a lot deeper than we usually dive.

However, global warming seems to be bringing them to shallower waters where humans are more likely to come into contact with them. Squids and jellyfish in general are predicted to do well out of global warming.

If things continue as they are, they will be our overlords soon. Until then, we can eat them. The way things are going, maybe there won't be much else to eat except squids garnished with dandelions. If that's the kind of culinary future we're facing, at least it's a damn tasty one with a high nutritional value!

More overlords

I'm writing this during a pandemic, so it seems fitting to pay tribute to another set of overlords.

The same global warming and deforestation that encourages plant and animal weeds also unleashes pathogens. It seems likely that viruses, bacteria and yeasts that are locked up in soil and ice will increasingly let themselves be loosed on the world as the environmental matrix that holds them back is disrupted. It's a shame we can't eat them. Among other things, they're too little.

Up in smoke

Anyway! Let's get back to the original point I was trying to make, which is that we have to eat the alien invaders to get them under control. The things is, it takes a hell of a lot to get an invasive species under control.

Consider the Hunter Valley marijuana infestation of the 1960s. Once upon a time hemp was farmed for fibre in Australia. But plants being plants, the seeds jumped the fence (again) and eventually invaded an area of land the size of Melbourne. To this day aging hippies still wax lyrical about wild marijuana bushes the size of trees. The government had a greater motive than

usual to get that particular infestation under control—the war on drugs is a helluva ... drug?—and it still took them nine whole years. And that was with herbicides and fire. It isn't called “weed” for nothing.

So anyway, while it probably isn't possible to get weeds 100% under control just by eating—or, um, otherwise consuming—them, in some cases it might be possible to make a dent in their population. Maybe this is a worthwhile thing to try when the ecosystem is gasping for survival. Some people think we should eat cane toads for exactly this reason. Cane toad meat is edible if you prepare it in such a way as to not to get poisoned by their squirty toxic glands.

Poison

That brings me to the next topic that needs to be considered when you're foraging or otherwise contemplating helping yourself to a free meal: the fact that toxins are abundant in nature. There are mountains of free food on offer, but there are also plenty of nasty molecules that can maim you, kill you and/or give you bad diarrhoea. Nature rarely gives up its tasty bits without a fight. It's usually mushrooms that people are most afraid of, but seeds, leaves, flowers and even fruit can all do serious damage.

I can testify that Mother Nature is wily. I've poisoned myself with foraged food twice: once with shaggy parasol mushrooms, and once with ... candlenuts. Seriously, read everything you can about identifying and preparing things before you go foraging. Don't just read what some random person says on the internet. Read books. Recent ones. Sometimes it even pays to go to the extra effort of reading scientific papers.

Even then, my real-life experience is that written sources do not always prepare us for the infinite glory of what is out there in nature. The good people at the poisons information hotline are really helpful if you ever need to call them.

Did I scare you? Good. It is important to maintain humility before Mother Nature. That said, it isn't clear to me that foraging is more dangerous than driving a car. With Covid-19 going around, placing people at risk where we gather indoors, it isn't even clear to me that foraging in the open air is more dangerous than shopping for food at the supermarket.

Filth

This brings me to another topic. Modern living is *filthy*. Fortunately, plants are not as filthy as you are. Soap grows in abundance in nature. Plants as well as people have to protect themselves from viruses. That's why



Image: edelman/istockPhoto

No, he does not want to be dinner—and yes, he is judging you for thinking about it.

they make saponins.

If you want to go find plant soap, the candlenuts that I poisoned myself with earlier are a good place to start. Don't be like me. Don't eat them.

Foraging for food security

In conclusion, foraging has potential to ensure some level of food security in our uncertain future. If it's done right it might even assist our long-suffering environment. If you're struggling because the government refuses to give unemployed people enough money to not starve, foraging can certainly help you make ends meet.

It will certainly take more than foraging to avert the trajectory that we're on. However, I'm eternally optimistic about the power of grassroots movements to change things for the better. Much that has been done to our precious environment can be undone by the people who did it: the human race. (And for that to happen, we need significant and dramatic action at governmental level, including legislation to force corporations responsible for the majority of pollution, to change their ways.)

Like every other species, humans have their origin in nature: we owe both our genesis and our continued existence to the

planet that nourishes us. Maybe we came to believe that we'd extricated ourselves from that cycle, that we had transcended nature. If that's what we think then we are surely mistaken. We will return to our dear Mother Earth one way or another.

And if our species doesn't survive for much longer, it comforts me to think that after we're all extinct the fungi will eat us. The Humboldt squids might get a few good meals out of us too. We will be broken down into soil detritus, which will nourish the dandelions. And we won't be there to eat any of them back. 🍄

AUTHOR:

Farida Iqbal
Farida is a deranged, unemployed forager. She has been munching on weeds non-stop for the past six years. She likes mushrooms best because they're weird and scary. Spending a lot of time foraging has made her more aware of how degraded our land is.

RESOURCES:

Weeds and climate change
bit.ly/3jIH2Pk

Eating cane toads
ab.co/3s9R4dX

The Weed Forager's Handbook
eatthatweed.com