

Friends of the Tonto and The Tonto National Forest's Invasive Species Program

The National Invasive Species Council defines an invasive species as a species that is not native to an ecosystem, whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm, or harm to human health. Invasive species can be plants or animals.

The Tonto National Forest has completed an environmental analysis to control a list of 68 invasive plants that are either known to grow on the Forest or have been documented nearby and could easily move onto the Forest. The decision that came from this analysis was to control invasive plants using "integrated vegetation management", which is a term for the complete toolbox of methods that have been documented to be effective in weed treatment: manual and mechanical control, use of biocontrol, cultural control (such as planting native plants that may be good competitors), use of fire, and use of herbicides.

Friends of the Tonto volunteers assist with the Forest's invasive plant management program by mapping invasive plants (mainly buffelgrass and fountain grass as of this time), enlisting support of schools and neighboring governmental organizations to control invasive plants on or near the Forest, acquiring grant funds for control projects, educating the public about invasive plants, and participating in manual and herbicide control projects.

Invasive plants such as South African buffelgrass, if left unchecked, will cause a complete ecosystem modification from the Sonoran desert's saguaro cactus community to a single-species grassland that burns very frequently. Saltcedar which came to the west from Asia, grows densely along riverbanks throughout the western U.S., crowding out native riparian trees, and effectively preventing access to the shore for kayakers and anglers. It is also extremely flammable and leaves a barren landscape after a fire, with no cover or food for wildlife.

While it is the business of the U.S. Forest Service to manage vegetation, management of animals is conducted by the State Game and Fish Department. Arizona Game and Fish manages animals that are hunted and fished, and they also have a non-game division that manages other animals. Of course, since the Forest Service manages vegetation, they are managing habitat for all of these animals, and the Tonto works hand-in-hand with Arizona Game and Fish.

An example of an invasive animal is the apple snail, recently found in the Lower Salt River. This large snail is native to South America. It is spread in the US mainly by the aquarium trade. The snails are harmful to populations of native species. They also hosts parasites that are a threat to human health.

Friends of the Tonto has begun a program to involve paddlers in controlling apple snails on the Lower Salt. We are working in cooperation with Game and Fish in knocking egg masses into the water from the vegetation where they have been laid (which prevents them from maturing and hatching), and monitoring snail populations by counting egg masses at sites along the river.

Friends of the Tonto recognizes the Tonto National Forest's invasive species management program as an opportunity for us to provide much-needed assistance and funding, and have a positive effect on ecosystems from the Sonoran desert to streamside areas, to Ponderosa Pine communities along the Mogollon Rim.