

May 6, 2009

GUEST OPINION

We must not surrender to buffelgrass

By Julio Betancourt and Rick Brusca
SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

For the first in a series on Tucson's "big thinkers," Arizona Daily Star reporter Tom Beal interviewed University of Arizona ecologist Mike Rosenzweig ("Tear down the wall between us and nature," April 19).

Much of Beal's story was devoted to Rosenzweig's thesis that simply setting aside conservation lands will be insufficient to stem the tide of global extinctions. Thus, humans should be promoting biodiversity in the places we live and work. Fair enough.

But then Rosenzweig, big thinker (or contrarian) that he is, speculates about invasive species, specifically buffelgrass and local efforts to stop its spread.

We tend to get "a little hysterical" about such things, it is too established and difficult to remove, and we should stop fighting it, he says.

Not to worry, he continues, "We will get used to not having the wildflowers that buffelgrass killed."

Losing our wildflowers will be bad enough, but Rosenzweig fails to mention that far more is at stake. Most desert plants are not fire-adapted, except mesquite and a few other shrubs that can resprout.

Buffelgrass evolved in fire-prone African savanna, however, and recovers quickly after burning. With each subsequent fire, native plants vanish but buffelgrass thickens and expands, fueling ever larger and more frequent wildfires.

At the risk of sounding "hysterical," if we do nothing, in a few decades our fireproof desert will be overrun by flammable grass. So what does this mean for the Sonoran Desert?

We will have to accept not only fewer wildflowers but also disappearing saguaros and a shrinking natural landscape that draws tourists from around the globe. Animals will lose habitat and tensions will flare in the scramble to save them.

In the foothills of the Catalina, Rincon, Tucson and Tortolita mountains — Pima County's "beachfront property" — coalescing patches of buffelgrass will connect fires at the bottom of the mountain with fires at the top. In the cross hairs are Sabino Canyon, Saguaro National Park and Tucson Mountain Park, not to mention an impressive array of resorts sited around these popular destinations and associated viewscapes.

Brush fires will become common along roadsides, near our businesses and homes. Given this growing fire risk, local governments, developers, fire departments and insurance companies will be forced to change the way they do business, the way we view open space.

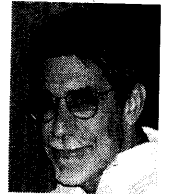
The predictable costs of letting buffelgrass keep spreading indefinitely will greatly exceed the price of controlling it now.

So what is Southern Arizona doing to combat buffelgrass, reduce the fire risk and save some portion of our natural heritage for posterity?

Removal efforts have been in place



Julio Betancourt is a senior scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Tucson.



Rick Brusca is the senior director of conservation and science at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

since 1994; more than 100 volunteers pull buffelgrass every month. In 2005, the state listed buffelgrass as a noxious weed, and local governments are passing ordinances to exclude it from private property and rights-of-way.

Several non-governmental organizations and public agencies recently drafted a regional strategic plan (www.buffelgrass.org), and the Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center was organized to coordinate its implementation across all jurisdictions.

The center's board members span key public and private sector entities. It is their consensus not to give up the fight against buffelgrass, as Rosenzweig wrongly advocates, but to press on forcefully with a coordinated and prioritized approach.

Write to Julio Betancourt at jlbetanc@usgs.gov

Write to Rick Brusca at rbrusca@desertmuseum.org