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Broom is taking more than its fair share

Michele Deakin, Oceanside Star
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Invasive species, and especially Scotch Broom, have been a topic of discussion lately in the news. This is a great topic for our community and sustainability.

Invasive plants, insects, birds, and other animals can all have an impact on the systems they inhabit. The New York Times (May 21) reported that damage from invasive species costs the world more than \$1.4 trillion annually - five percent of the global economy.

Islands, like ours, are more susceptible to the impacts of invasive species than are the larger land masses. As the IUCN, or World Conservation Union, has found, islands are more vulnerable to invasions and more likely to suffer a catastrophic loss of biodiversity as a result of these invasions. The good news is they are also more likely to respond to successful eradication methods to reduce or remove threats.

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On islands there are not as many ecosystems – different kinds of habitats – because there is simply less land than on mainland areas. This means there is not the room to make huge adjustments in the types of vegetation or animals that may arrive. As a result, any introduced plant or creature will take a higher percentage of the land mass for each ecosystem on an island. By taking more of the

habitat, they therefore have a more significant impact on those systems.

We have many introduced plants that have become invasive and need control including English ivy, trumpet vine, periwinkle, Japanese knotweed, knapweed, and Scotch broom.

Broom did not exist here until introduced in 1850 by Captain Walter Grant with only a few seeds. One-hundred and fifty-eight years later, it now exists from Haida Gwaii south throughout BC to California.

The impacts of Scotch broom are many. It grows in thickets and prevents light from reaching the forest floor or farm field, thus changing the growing conditions and the ability of native plants to flourish. It can form pure, dense stands for miles along highways and country roads, crowding out native species and destroying wildlife habitat. It reduces the productive capacity of forest lands and can impact the quality of timber produced. It takes a place to grow away from native plants, and in many cases out-competes them and so reduces native biodiversity. In Oregon and Washington, complete Douglas-fir plantation failures due to Scotch broom have been documented. In California, Scotch broom has infested over 250,000 hectares of rangeland. Scotch broom may be threatening endangered ecosystems such as Garry oak woodlands.

Broom also presents several health concerns as it contains toxic alkaloids, which can depress the heart and nervous system in humans, and can poison a child who eats the pods that look like peas from the garden. Perhaps this is also the reason that many suffer greater allergic reactions to this plant than native plants, or that deer and other wildlife cannot eat this plant.

The fact that nothing eats this plant is a concern. Because Broom is replacing the natural plants and nothing eats it, there is a lot less for native insects, birds, or mammals to eat, and so the whole system is affected.

