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Conference Abstract

# Out of place but in your search history – Identifying drivers of public interest in invasive alien species

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## Abstract

Adequately addressing challenges associated with invasive alien species (IAS) requires not only understanding the underlying ecological processes that drive invasions but also considering the human perspectives inherently interwoven throughout the invasion process. Gaining insights into the dynamics and drivers of public interest in IAS can help us develop targeted outreach and communication campaigns. Effectively capturing public attention and triggering interest in IAS may create a valuable opportunity to raise awareness about their impacts and promote preventative measures. It can also encourage the public to engage in initiatives such as citizen science, as well as help identify and potentially mitigate conflicts between the public and management actions.

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Moreover, engagement with the public can help create shared responsibilities for these actions.

The goal of this study was to identify drivers of short-term peaks in public interest, approximated by Google search queries. For this purpose, we conducted a case study analyzing Google Health search query data for 88 IAS listed on the EU List of Union concern across all EU member states and the UK between 2016 and 2025. First, we identified the 10 species that accumulated the highest interest across all 28 countries. Subsequently, we determined the 10 highest short-term peaks for each country and selected those peaks linked to the top 10 species for further analysis identifying potential drivers behind the observed increases in interest. Using Google search engine, we examined the context in which each species appeared across various media platforms such as social media and news within the week preceding and the week following each peak. We then classified the topics covered (i.e. first reports of species, health concerns/ reported deaths, etc.), documented the type of platform it appeared on (i.e. websites, social media, etc.), and identified the associated stakeholder groups (i.e. experts, management bodies, news, interest groups, etc.). The overall highest interest was accumulated by raccoon (*Procyon lotor)* followed by coypu (*Myocastor coypus*) and Asian hornet (*Vespa velutina nigrithorax*). In total, the top 10 species consisted of five mammals, one insect, and four plants. The temporal development of public interest showed strong variations between countries and species. Variations were also found in the identified potential drivers of increased interest. Reports on first arrivals of a species or the warning of an approaching invasion were driving interest across all taxa. While reports on health impacts and deaths were mainly linked to invasive plants and *V. velutina*, increased interest in invasive mammals was often linked to unexpected encounters of the public with individual animals. Our study highlights trends and inter-taxa differences in topics, platforms, and stakeholder involvement and proposes how this knowledge can inform and improve future outreach and communication campaigns.

## Keywords

Biological invasions; human dimensions; culturomics; public interest

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.
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