ARPHA Conference Abstracts 9: e203373
doi: 10.3897/aca.9.e203373

OPEN ACCESS

Conference Abstract

Turning Policy into Action: The Alien Squirrel Emergency Team (ASET) as a Model for Rapid Response in Italy

Valentina La Morgia[‡], Daniele Paoloni[§], Sandro Bertolino[|], Adriano Martinoli[¶], Lucas Wauters[¶], Paola Aragno[‡], Gaetano Aloise[#], Lucilla Carnevali[‡], Piero Genovesi[¤]

‡ ISPRA, Roma, Italy
§ Istituto Oikos, Milano, Italy
| University of Turin, Torino, Italy
¶ Università degli Studi dell'Insubria, Varese, Italy
# Università della Calabria, Rende (Cosenza), Italy
¤ Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, and Chair IUCN Invasive Species Specialist Group, Italy, Rome, Italy

Corresponding author: Valentina La Morgia (valentina.lamorgia@isprambiente.it)

Received: 09 Jun 2026 | Published: 09 Jun 2026

Citation: La Morgia V, Paoloni D, Bertolino S, Martinoli A, Wauters L, Aragno P, Aloise G, Carnevali L, Genovesi P (2026) Turning Policy into Action: The Alien Squirrel Emergency Team (ASET) as a Model for Rapid Response in Italy. ARPHA Conference Abstracts 9: e203373. https://doi.org/10.3897/aca.9.e203373

Abstract

Biological invasions require rapid responses, yet bureaucratic procedures frequently delay action. Although European and Italian regulations (EU Regulation 1143/2014; Legislative Decree 230/2017) mandate rapid eradication of Invasive Alien Species (IAS), a significant implementation gap persists. In Italy, the surveillance system is fragmented, and local authorities frequently lack the specialised expertise and operational capacity for immediate intervention. To bridge this gap, we established the Alien Squirrel Emergency Team (ASET), an expert-led task force designed to convert early warnings into field responses.

ASET brings together researchers from the Institute for Environmental Protection and Research and several Italian universities. It was founded within the framework of the LIFE U-SAVEREDS project (LIFE13 BIO/IT/000204) and is focused on the management of alien sciurids. The team operates through a multi-channel monitoring network, integrating data from citizen science platforms, social media, and direct reports from private citizens

© La Morgia V et al. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

and local institutions. It functions as an Early Warning mechanism, coupled with expert validation of each record to ensure accurate identification of target species such as *Sciurus carolinensis*, *Callosciurus erythraeus*, *C. finlaysonii*, and *C. prevostii*.

Since 2018, ASET has handled 22 reports across 9 Italian regions using a flexible approach. A key component is the rapid coordination of on-site inspections following opportunistic sightings, as demonstrated by interventions targeting isolated individuals in several localities of northern Italy. Near the Slovenian border, ASET also conducted trained local operators, fostering the transfer of technical skills to regional staff.

Beyond initial surveys, the team leverages existing infrastructures, for example, by collaborating with monitoring funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in National Parks and cross-taxa projects like MonitAnt (Biodiversa+) in South Tyrol. These synergies optimise field efforts and maximise detection probability and also illustrates ASET's capacity to track IAS occurrences over time. An initial report of the American red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) in 2020 was systematically followed up, ensuring that subsequent suspected sightings in the area were prioritised rather than treated as isolated events. Persistent monitoring prevents the loss of critical information during administrative turnovers and supports a long-term strategic understanding of invasion dynamics.

Recognising that removal actions often encounter strong public and animal rights opposition, ASET builds on experience from LIFE U-SAVEREDS and the previous LIFE EC-SQUARE project (LIFE09 NAT/IT/000095), to provide support in developing effective communication strategies. By providing expertise on the human dimension of IAS management, the team assist local authorities in anticipating and navigating social conflicts.

Moreover, ASET acts as an intermediary between local administrations and international funding opportunities. A recent example is the participation in the IUCN Rapid Response Fund (RRF) call, following the detection of a new *C. prevostii* nucleus. ASET informed the regional agency of this opportunity and facilitated connections with partners able to manage the application process.

Finally, beyond emergency response, ASET contributes to long-term strategic objectives. In some regions, dedicated field technicians operate in close coordination with local institutions and maintain regular contact with ASET members, ensuring continuity between research and management. In southern Italy, the team is investigating the genetic identity of *Callosciurus* populations and leading the development of new LIFE project proposals. ASET also expanded its scope to international cooperation, for instance, through exchanges with French colleagues on the management of *Callosciurus* .

Ultimately, this case study indicates that bridging the implementation gap requires more than technical expertise; it depends on continuity of information, strategic communication, and cross-sectoral coordination. By integrating these elements, the ASET model

consolidates fragmented local efforts into a coherent national approach, providing a transferable framework for IAS management across the European Union.

Keywords

alien squirrels, citizen science, rapid response, resource optimisation, science-policy interface, technical task force.

Presenting author

Piero Genovesi

Presented at

Neobiota 2026, the 14th International Conference on Biological Invasions

Funding program

LIFE+

Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.