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From anti-science to environmental nihilism: the Fata Morgana of invasive species denialism

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1 **Title:** From anti-science to environmental nihilism: the Fata Morgana of invasive
2 species denialism

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14

15 **Abstract:**

16

17 Invasive species denialism (ISD) is a controversial and hitherto underexplored topic,
18 particularly with regard to its potential impacts on stakeholder engagement in support
19 of invasive species management. We examined how ISD is framed within the Great
20 Lakes invasive species community, as well as the impacts of excluding and including
21 those perceived as denialists in engagement efforts. We interviewed key informants
22 in the region to gain an understanding of their framings of ISD, as well as focus
23 groups allowing participants to discuss the impacts of exclusion and inclusion of

24 stakeholders during the engagement process. ISD discussions were organised into
25 three framings: 1) invasive species denialism; 2) invasive species cynicism; 3)
26 invasive species nihilism. Participants raised concerns about outright exclusion of
27 stakeholders and offered recommendations for mitigation of the impacts of inclusion
28 of proponents of ISD in during stakeholder engagement. Our results have shown that
29 a better understanding of the different framings of ISD is crucial to improve
30 communication with stakeholders and to better inform responses and mitigation
31 efforts. The newly defined framings of invasive species cynicism and invasive
32 species nihilism demonstrate that more targeted responses to specific forms of ISD
33 are needed to improve stakeholder engagement outcomes.

34

35 **Keywords:** communication, cynicism, engagement, framing, management,
36 outreach, stakeholder

37

38 **Introduction**

39

40 Science denialism, while not a new concept, is one which has seen heightened focus
41 in recent years in light of worldwide threats such as climate change or the recent
42 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Science denialism is described as an “unwillingness to
43 believe in the existing scientific evidence” (Björnberg et al. 2017). Some have
44 employed a more goal-oriented meaning, using the term to describe individuals
45 using rhetoric to give the impression that scientific consensus has not been reached
46 on a topic (Diethelm and McKee 2009), for example claiming that the existence of
47 climate change is still ‘up for debate’.

48

49 Like climate change and the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, invasive species are a global
50 threat of great scientific, economic, and social concern and attention. These global
51 threats have also received a lot of attention in the academic literature arising from
52 their mitigation or management efforts further complicated by 'denialism' narratives
53 (Brulle 2020; Taylor 2020). Recently, some invasion ecologists have voiced
54 concerns regarding an increase in vocal opposition toward invasive species
55 management and regulation that they refer to as denialism and argue is rooted in a
56 "rejection of undisputed scientific facts" (Russell and Blackburn 2017) and promotion
57 of manufactured doubts (Ricciardi and Ryan 2018a). This denialism is described by
58 these researchers as motivated by a distrust of scientists, and proponents of the
59 denialist position are characterised as being sensational and controversial for
60 personal reasons, rather than representing valid criticisms. This description,
61 however, is challenged by other researchers who argue that many disagreements in
62 invasion science stem from different values (Frank 2019) and the choice of language
63 and militaristic metaphors used to describe invasive species (Larson 2005; Janovsky
64 and Larson 2019), rather than a rejection of scientific facts, and that the term
65 'denialism' is an inappropriate descriptor, particularly given its historical use as a
66 pejorative with a troubled history (Sagoff 2018).

67

68 The controversy surrounding invasive species denialism (ISD) is worth considering,
69 particularly in the context of invasive species management. Management of invasive
70 species relies not only on researchers and decision-makers, but also the
71 involvement and cooperation of various stakeholders to ensure success (Shackleton
72 et al. 2019). Regardless of whether any of these groups might consider themselves

73 to be denialists, the fact remains that at least some researchers, decision-makers,
74 and members of the public have been perceived by prominent invasive species
75 researchers as making denialist claims (Ricciardi and Ryan 2018a; Russell and
76 Blackburn 2017). The ongoing arguments about what constitutes 'invasive species
77 denialism' and the motivations behind it seen in the literature (Ricciardi and Ryan
78 2018a, 2018b; Sagoff 2018, 2020; Munro et al. 2019) demonstrate that this term is
79 not universally understood or defined and may pose a barrier to cooperation
80 between those labelled versus those doing the labelling.

81

82 It is therefore reasonable to question whether people who are critical of invasive
83 species management may have reasons for their positions other than denying
84 scientific claims. If such critics hold different values and preferences of where public
85 funding ought to be spent on issues of environmental protection, their views would
86 not be accurately reflected by being labelled as simply science denialism.

87 Engagement of stakeholder groups, each with their own values and preferences, is
88 an integral part of invasive species management used to spread awareness of
89 invasive species to the public (Carter et al. 2021), improve research outcomes and
90 inform ecological models (Samson et al. 2017), and resolve conflicts arising during
91 management efforts (Crowley et al. 2017). It is therefore also reasonable to question
92 whether misunderstandings or differences in framing (Golebie et al. 2022)
93 perspectives on invasive species may limit stakeholder engagement in invasive
94 species management, in turn contributing to reduced ability to achieve those
95 management goals.

96

97 Our study, therefore, asked how perceptions of invasive species denialism affect
98 stakeholder engagement with invasive species management. We considered four
99 questions: 1) How is the concept of ISD framed by researchers, decision-makers,
100 and the public?; 2) What are the impacts of excluding those labelled as ISDs, if any?;
101 3) What are the impacts of including those labelled as denialists, if any?; and, 4) If
102 there are negative impacts, how might these be mitigated?

103

104 By examining the ways in which 'denialism' is described by participants, we will
105 determine whether the meanings are as clear cut as a rejection of undisputed
106 scientific facts, or if this label is applied using other framings. By exploring the
107 impacts of excluding and including individuals or groups labelled as denialists, we
108 will explore some of the hurdles to outreach and engagement that different framings
109 can occasion. Finally, our study will outline the impacts on effective communication
110 and outreach arising from the 'denialism' label itself, regardless of the intended or
111 perceived meaning.

112 **Methods**

113 **Data Collection**

114

115 Within the aquatic invasive species community in the Laurentian Great Lakes basin,
116 key informants were identified by the researchers and invited to participate in semi-
117 structured, in-depth interviews [University of Toronto Research Ethics Board Protocol
118 #40500]. Key informants are those within a particular community who, based on their
119 knowledge, experience, and position in the community, are able and willing to
120 communicate with the researcher about the topic of interest (McKenna and Main,

121 2013). These key informants included individuals with provincial, state, and federal
122 government agencies, those involved in public communication or outreach, and
123 academic researchers. Nine key informants were interviewed between April and
124 August 2021 using the Zoom platform. Each interview took approximately 1-2 hours.
125 Interview participants were asked four questions pertaining to denialism: 1) Does the
126 term 'invasive species denialism' mean anything to you, and if so what does it
127 mean?; 2) Are there particular ideas or viewpoints that you would characterise as
128 denialist?; 3) Do you believe that individuals or groups are invasive species
129 denialists?; and, 4) Have you ever had trouble working with an individual or group
130 due to believing that they were an invasive species denialist, or because they
131 believed you were an invasive species denialist?

132

133 Following the interviews, participants were invited to participate in a focus group to
134 further discuss as a group the perspectives on ISD previously shared individually
135 during the interviews. Five of the interview participants were willing and able to
136 continue participating further in the focus group. The focus groups were conducted
137 using an asynchronous e-Delphi format over the SurveyMonkey (Momentive Inc.
138 2018) platform. The e-Delphi is an iterative process, whereby topic experts are
139 asked to discuss conflicting perspectives on a topic and come to a consensus over
140 several rounds of group feedback (Cole et al. 2013). The asynchronous e-Delphi
141 format over SurveyMonkey enabled participants to think over the issues discussed
142 and contribute their ideas at their own pace, and over a time frame convenient for
143 them, to alleviate ongoing online fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus
144 group lasted five rounds, with each round lasting one week. Participants were asked
145 about the importance of outreach in invasive species management, and to explore

146 the impacts of both exclusion and inclusion of invasive species denialists on that
147 outreach. The group was also asked for recommendations for how to alleviate some
148 of these impacts, based on their own extensive experience in the Great Lakes
149 aquatic invasive species community.

150

151 **Data Analysis**

152

153 Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim using Zoom software, and
154 then corrected manually to ensure accuracy. Anonymized interview transcripts were
155 uploaded onto the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, Version 12 (QSR
156 International Pty. Ltd. 2018). Focus group responses each week were summarised
157 by the facilitator and participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed with
158 the summary of the group's positions, disagreed, or wished to add additional
159 information or context. The anonymized discussion data were then downloaded from
160 the SurveyMonkey platform into Microsoft Excel.

161

162 Analysis of the interview and focus group responses involved a reflexive thematic
163 analysis, using an inductive and semantic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). A
164 reflexive thematic analysis recognizes the importance of the researcher themselves as
165 an "analytical resource" by following a six-phase process: 1) familiarising themselves
166 with the data; 2) systematic data coding; 3) using the data to generate themes; 4)
167 reviewing the themes; 5) naming and refining the themes; and, 6) writing the paper
168 (Braun and Clarke 2020). Inductive thematic analysis allows the data to drive
169 framings, rather than solely those within the existing literature. A semantic approach

170 is one in which the data are described based upon what the participants have said,
171 then organised and interpreted by the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2006). We used
172 this approach because it allows for the ways in which participants describe ISD and
173 use those terms to be captured and analysed without presupposing that they will line
174 up with previously published perspectives, or the researchers' expectations.

175

176 From the interviews, three framings of invasive species denialism were extracted
177 during the analysis. These framings are "invasive species denialism", "invasive
178 species cynicism", and "invasive species nihilism". In the focus group that followed,
179 three potential impacts emerged as a result of excluding or including individuals or
180 groups believed to be denialists: 1) impacts relating to the accuracy of information; 2)
181 impacts relating to management decisions, goals, and outcomes; and, 3) impacts
182 regarding representation and perceived legitimacy. Finally, the focus group provided
183 recommendations to mitigate some of the impacts discussed, which were to
184 incorporate facilitators into engagement efforts, providing balanced information, and
185 to know when engagement is no longer worth continuing.

186

187 **Results**

188

189 In this section, we begin by describing how interviewees interpreted ISD, which we
190 organised into three framings. Next, we report on the engagement impacts of ISD
191 followed by participant recommendations as they emerged during the focus groups.

192 **Invasive species framings**

193

194 Three framings of ‘invasive species denialism’ emerged from key interviews (Table
 195 1). These framings do not represent a definitive meaning of ‘ISD’ nor do we propose
 196 to set boundaries on its potential meanings and implications. Rather, the emergent
 197 framings are intended only to organise the perspectives presented by participants in
 198 a way that clarifies different meanings and how they may shape interactions between
 199 stakeholder groups.

Denialism framings	Forms of the framing	Paraphrased examples
Invasive species denialism	Lack of understanding of science	<i>Comparison to climate or medical denialism</i>
		<i>Inability to understand science in general</i>
		<i>Used to silence critics, frame arguments as non-scientific</i>
	Not believing in the existence of invasive species	<i>Invasive species are not real / are not a problem</i>
		<i>It's just movement from one place to another</i>
		<i>This is natural / inevitable</i>
	Lack of understanding of invasive species science	<i>Nature will solve the problem itself</i>
		<i>Refusal to believe in one's role in the spread of invasives</i>
		<i>This species does not require management</i>
<i>Not believing that management plans could go awry</i>		
Invasive species cynicism	Nothing in it for them /Taking action perceived as costly	<i>Action would be inconvenient</i>
	Species-centric values	<i>Species they care about have not been impacted</i>
	Inaction perceived as beneficial	<i>This species is providing food for other species</i>
Invasive species nihilism	Discussing invasive species is pointless	<i>Who cares? / Why bother?</i>
		<i>Invasive species don't matter</i>
		<i>This is not worth talking about / This is a waste of time</i>
	Management efforts are futile	<i>This is a waste of money</i> <i>This is a losing proposition / This is futile</i>

		<i>We shouldn't be doing anything about them</i>
		<i>Optimism is form of denialism</i>
	Uncertainty leading to inaction	<i>The uncertainty paralyzes us</i>

200

201 **Table 1:** Framings of invasive species denialism from participant interviews, with
 202 paraphrased examples.

203

204 *Invasive Species Denialism*

205

206 *“Does nuance equal denialism? I don't believe so, but others might.”*

207 (Interview participant, environmental author and journalist)

208

209 This denialism framing reflects the framing commonly discussed in invasion ecology

210 literature (Table 1), and we therefore labelled it as invasive species denialism. This

211 framing includes the description of the opiner as having a limited understanding of

212 invasive species science. The framing also mimics recent discussions about medical

213 denialism during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one participant explained:

214 *“I've been saying this, this whole pandemic too. Like not even just in terms of*

215 *invasive species, but like in general. These people. It's just like people that don't*

216 *believe in doctors or vaccines”*(Interview participant, invasive species public

217 outreach). This framing is generally described as lacking any understanding of

218 science in general, and people perceived this denialism as more generalised, rather

219 than referring to specific people or events. This framing was also described the least,

220 with participants often stating that they had not personally had encounters with

221 anyone holding these views and the majority voicing scepticism that such people

222 really existed. One participant voiced concern that this framing of ISD was used both

223 in the literature and the invasive species community to silence or blunt criticism of
224 the status quo. They said “[l]argely, my experience with that term was seeing it used
225 by members of the academic community to potentially either discredit or silence or
226 blunt the impact of those outside of the academy who were daring to suggest that it
227 wasn't as black and white as they were suggesting it was” (Interview participant,
228 environmental author and journalist).

229

230 This framing of denialism was also used to describe those who may understand
231 science generally, but who either did not believe in invasive species or did not
232 believe invasive species were a problem (Table 1). This type of denialism was
233 described far more often by participants, and encounters with individuals expressing
234 these views were often described in terms of frustration or conflict. For example
235 “definitely the evolution arguments of, you know, ‘it's just how things are and this is a
236 natural progression’. That to me, that's a bit of denialism. And others saying that
237 there's no impacts from invasives in general, ‘it's just another fish’ or ‘it's just another
238 plant, what's the big deal?’. I definitely hear that on some occasions, yeah” (Interview
239 participant, provincial/state government).

240

241 This framing also includes those who believed that invasive species were a problem
242 but who lacked an understanding of invasive species science (Table 1). This
243 included people who did not agree that a particular species required management,
244 as well as people who objected to suggestions that they or their industry were
245 responsible for spreading invasive species. For example,

246

247 *[The lakers] will tell you that, and quite rightly so, that they don't bring [invasive*
248 *species] into the system, because it's the ocean going vessels, the salties, that do.*
249 *Which is true. But then they'll deny that they really have an effect on it, knowing full*
250 *well that they're moving them around the system. There's no way under the sun that*
251 *a Zebra Mussel introduced in Lake St Clair would make it to Lake Superior without it*
252 *being moved by a ship. Internally, they move this stuff around all the time, but they're*
253 *in denial about what they should do"* (Interview participant, invasive species
254 communicator).

255 In addition, this framing also included the view of people who supported
256 management action to prevent or control aquatic invasive species, but who did not
257 understand the potential risks or possibility of failure. Many participants expressed
258 frustration when publics expected management efforts to be wholly without risk of
259 environmental harms, or to be 100% effective, despite the fact that that was not
260 typically possible.

261

262 *Invasive Species Cynicism*

263

264 *"It's poo-pooing something that we know is a problem because you don't want to be*
265 *harmed personally"* (Interview participant, invasive species communicator)

266

267 The second framing identified is characterised by a description of someone with a
268 lack of support for invasive species management but, in contrast to the previous
269 framing, this view is not because the person lacked understanding of the science
270 behind it, but because of cynical motivations (Table 1). The key difference was
271 whether the individual voicing the denialist viewpoint was believed to understand

272 invasive species science. Invasive species cynics are people who are not interested
273 in, or outright resisting invasive species management because of perceived costs or
274 benefits to themselves. Participants describing these perspectives often referred to
275 the impacts that these people were potentially having on the environment and
276 society, and stated that those folks appeared not to care. *“It’s a cynical, ‘I’m going to
277 foist my costs off on society’ or ‘I’m going to profit at the expense of others who are
278 going to be harmed by this’. That’s what denialism is all about”* (Interview Participant,
279 invasive species communicator).

280

281 Participants also mentioned that some stakeholders were uninterested in invasive
282 species management because the native species they cared about had not been
283 impacted by invasive species, “I think there are some cases where stakeholders do
284 have a single species focus and they are less concerned about the broader benefits
285 of biodiversity and ecosystem function” (Interview participant, federal researcher).

286 Participants also perceived some people as resistant to the idea that species
287 required management because these people had a particular use for them, for
288 example *“you know some of our gardening plants are not native and trying to tell
289 someone that their pretty flower is maybe a problem is actually where I’ve noticed
290 [denialism] the most”* (Interview participant, federal science advisor). In these cases,
291 this framing of denialism again reflected a position of resistance to invasive species
292 management due to the perceived costs of action or benefits of inaction, and so
293 were also grouped into invasive species cynicism.

294 *Invasive Species Nihilism*

295

296 *“From first-hand experience I would certainly say that there are [denialists] out there.*
297 *And I think it's not even limited to non-professional stakeholders. I think it goes really*
298 *across all members of society, including professionals” (Interview participant,*
299 *provincial/state government invasive species manager).*

300

301 The third framing of ISD described a lack of support for invasive species research or
302 management due to the perception that the whole endeavour was ultimately without
303 meaning or purpose (Table 1). This category was described the most often, and
304 descriptions tended to involve first-hand experiences. It included descriptions of
305 denialism that focused on invasive species research, prevention, management, or
306 outreach as ultimately futile, pointless, or without meaning. This was the form of
307 denialism most frequently described by participants, and one that participants most
308 often described having had first-hand, personal experiences. People with this
309 perspective were described by interview participants as approaching and informing
310 them about the ultimate futility of their management efforts and other invasive
311 species work in a variety of contexts.

312

313 Many saw nihilistic denialism posted to them online, saying *“I feel like we get a lot of*
314 *deniers on social media. Not a ton, but like anytime we post things it's like you get*
315 *people that just say ‘oh just eat them’ or ‘who cares?’, or like ‘there’s bigger issues*
316 *out there like water pollution and water quality, why are you wasting your time and*
317 *money on this?”* (Interview participant, invasive species outreach). Many participants
318 also described being approached in-person, saying
319 *I’ll be at public events, and you know every once in a while you’ll have one or two*
320 *people that are like ‘why are we spending money on this? This is pointless, there’s*

321 *no point in trying, they're already here'. And so, it's not really disagreeing with the*
322 *definition of invasive, or early detection rapid response, but more so in the spending*
323 *of dollars, especially public dollars, on those efforts when to them, it seems futile, it*
324 *seems pointless* (Interview participant, invasive species public outreach).

325

326 Those people expressing these views were described by participants as being
327 particularly concerned with the waste of financial resources on an endeavour that
328 they did not consider to be worthwhile.

329

330 Participants also described experiences with these types of nihilistic framings of their
331 work not just in-person, but in professional settings, and even from colleagues.

332 When asked about ISD, one participant responded sadly that they believed others
333 perceived them to be the invasive species denialist because they continued to
334 experience hope related to their own work, rather than believing the endeavour was
335 hopeless. They said

336

337 *I suppose my amount of optimism is a form of denial... I've had people approach me*
338 *being like 'how on earth do you still do this work? Why do you do this? This is*
339 *ridiculous! It's a waste of your time!'. I've definitely had those people during*
340 *conferences, and meetings, and presentations confront me about this. And my*
341 *response is, you know, I'd rather try than not. It's worth the effort. So, I guess I'm sort*
342 *of a denialist in that way* (Interview participant, provincial/state government invasive
343 species management).

344

345 This belief that others may experience them as a denialist during the course of their
346 work in invasive species management was not limited to being told one's work was
347 not worthwhile. Others involved in management decision-making also expressed the
348 possibility that their views may be considered denialist by stakeholders because they
349 did not support prioritising the detection of invasive species that were unlikely to be
350 prevented or controlled. For example, one participant stated:

351

352 *I believe that if we don't have the resources to do anything about an invasive*
353 *species, or we're not willing to do anything about an invasive species, I don't believe*
354 *in putting resources into early detection. Like why bother spending resources if we're*
355 *not going to do anything about it? I know that can rub people the wrong way, and I*
356 *might get labelled a little bit with denialism* (Interview participant, federal government
357 science advisor).

358

359 Again, there was a linkage made between a perception of potential waste of
360 resources on management, and denialism. However, when this participant was
361 asked if resources were unlimited would they be willing to take action to prevent
362 every invasive species, they said that "*[m]aybe if we had all the money in the world,*
363 *and we knew that it just doesn't make efficient sense, or effective sense, or it's a*
364 *good use of the taxpayer dollars, we might still not address something, right?"*
365 (Interview participant, federal science advisor).

366 ***Engagement Impacts***

367 Interview participants all agreed that engagement with stakeholders was a priority for
368 invasive species management. Furthermore, they all felt that stakeholder groups

369 should not be excluded on the basis of being perceived to be denialists. However,
370 participants also agreed that inclusion of people with different perceptions or values
371 regarding invasive species management could act as a barrier to communication or
372 action. To address this challenge in more detail, the focus group was asked to
373 discuss these issues as a group. They were asked to describe and come to a
374 consensus regarding some of the impacts of excluding folks believed to be
375 denialists, as well as the impacts of including them in engagement and outreach.
376 They were also asked to come up with some recommendations as a group to
377 prevent or mitigate any of these impacts. The impacts outlined and agreed upon by
378 the focus group can be divided into three categories: 1) Impacts relating to the
379 accuracy of information; 2) Impacts relating to management decisions, goals, and
380 outcomes; and, 3) Impacts regarding representation and perceived legitimacy.

381 *Impacts relating to the accuracy of information*

382 Decision-makers engage stakeholder groups in invasive species management to
383 inform, as well as gather input about, invasive species occurrences and
384 management practices. Focus group participants raised concerns about excluding
385 stakeholder groups for two main reasons: that engagement might be biased and
386 therefore lead to less effective outcomes; and second, that unique and important
387 knowledge may be missed if some stakeholder groups are excluded. Focus group
388 participants were particularly concerned that “*exclusion of different stakeholder*
389 *groups may lead to a biased or limited representation of different values and*
390 *perceptions*” in the data they gather during engagement efforts for use by decision-
391 makers, making it less accurate and therefore less useful for effective management.

392

393 Inclusion of more diverse perspectives was conversely seen as potentially allowing
394 for improvement in the overall information available to researchers and managers.
395 For example, it was noted that some people seen as denialists may still have
396 information on novel invasion pathways that could be of value to managers.
397 Furthermore, engagement with as many people as possible was described as
398 providing greater leverage to promote changes in behaviour and practices.

399

400 *Impacts relating to management decisions, goals, and outcomes*

401 Participants often described outreach as potentially the only way to convince those
402 who were opposed to management efforts of its value. Exclusion of individuals or
403 groups without at least an initial attempt at outreach was therefore seen as generally
404 undesirable as it could negatively affect the ability to meet engagement and
405 management goals. As noted by one participant, "*[e]xcluding engagement is a*
406 *problem because politicians are not going to regulate a major industry without some*
407 *justification, and if the industry is not engaged with those working in AIS policies,*
408 *they have no incentive at all to cooperate and seek mutually agreeable solutions*".

409

410 The primary concern of people in the focus group regarding inclusion of perceived
411 denialists in engagement efforts was that it could lead to delays in decision-making,
412 particularly when urgent decisions and actions are necessary. There were concerns
413 that such inclusion "*may make the process more difficult, or lead to decisions that*
414 *are not supported by some decision-makers*". Their inclusion was also believed to
415 require increased time and effort as "*repeated conversations and outreach will need*
416 *to take place along with the understanding that some stakeholders will never support*
417 *the project*".

418 *Impacts regarding representation and perceived legitimacy*

419 Inclusion of diverse stakeholders was repeatedly emphasised as a priority, and any
420 exclusion was seen as a potential detriment to that. Exclusion of individuals or
421 groups believed to be denialists was also described as “*risking public outcry and loss*
422 *of faith in the process*” of engagement. This was described not as necessarily
423 harmful to a current management project, but potentially harmful for future attempts
424 at engagement if it was perceived that only agreeable perspectives were included.

425

426 Because inclusion and representation of diverse stakeholders and values was seen
427 as a priority, the inclusion of denialists was seen as an inherently positive choice,
428 despite the aforementioned drawbacks. Some also noted the ethical importance of
429 including all those who had been, or may be, harmed by the invader to give them the
430 chance to learn more and prevent future harms.

431 ***Participant Recommendations***

432

433 The focus group consensus was that inclusion of diverse perspectives, values, and
434 stakeholders was a priority to them, even if those e were believed to be denialists
435 who may impede ongoing management goals. Therefore, the recommendations they
436 provided regarding how to best proceed to mitigate potential impacts focused on
437 those impacts resulting from the denialists' inclusion. Exclusion, at least directly from
438 the outset, was not presented as a viable option.

439

440 *1. Include people trained to engage with stakeholders to facilitate engagement*

441 This guidance was described as being important when engagement may become
442 counterproductive, either because participants are not actually interested in invasive
443 species management, or they are against management entirely. It was emphasised
444 that *“mitigating this type of issue can be helped with a strong chairperson during the*
445 *engagement process overall. Having participant guiding principles, similar to the*
446 *Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat, helps the chair point to unproductive*
447 *conversations”*. The use of a facilitator could also potentially ease the emotional
448 burdens placed on the practitioners facing nihilistic comments regarding their careers
449 or values by having a third party take on that responsibility.

450

451 *2. Provide clear, balanced information*

452 This was viewed as particularly important for those considered denialists due to their
453 disbelief in the existence of invasive species, or invasive species science. A
454 scepticism toward invasive species science or researchers was described as
455 stemming from hearing ‘one-sided’ information from science communicators. As
456 explained by one participant,

457

458 *The best way to engage individuals who do not tend to agree with prevention or*
459 *other management of AIS is to show examples of situations where AIS have led to*
460 *important (i.e., damaging) ecological or social outcomes. To ensure credibility and*
461 *avoid the 'sky is falling' mentality, these should also be countered with situations*
462 *where AIS have not led to extreme impacts, which ensures that objectivity is*
463 *retained.*

464

465 This was seen as improving credibility of the communicator, and potentially allowing
466 sceptical participants to be convinced.

467

468 In addition, this guidance was also viewed as important for those who lacked an
469 understanding of invasive species science, or management limitations or costs.

470 Rather than asking those who may not be informed on this topic, participants noted

471 that “*effective engagement needs to be done with a series of structured*

472 *management options that clearly lay out potential management targets, their costs*

473 *(ecological and economic), and related uncertainties, which is a very large*

474 *undertaking*”. This was described as useful for allowing stakeholders to understand

475 the goals and limitations of management, and to make choices that are possible to

476 implement. They also emphasised that communicators “*should also ensure that*

477 *balanced information makes it clear that invasive species management may fail (i.e.,*

478 *management success is not a certain outcome, and we have to be cognizant of this*

479 *possibility when committing resources and seeking stakeholder support)*”. Ensuring

480 that participants are aware that success is not guaranteed also enables them to be

481 better informed, and make realistic decisions.

482

483 3. Know when to move on

484 It was noted that breakdowns in communication can occur for a variety of reasons,

485 including resistance due to holding denialist positions. It was therefore noted that

486 “*there are times when you need to accept that, for whatever reason, the*

487 *stakeholders aren't ready to hear what you have to say or to move forward on a*

488 *project. Best to reduce engagement and, perhaps, bring in others to try a different*

489 *strategy*”, and that “*the manager might have to accept that he/she can never ‘adjust’*

490 *all stakeholder expectations.*” Focus group participants noted that they had an ethical
491 responsibility to represent all members of the community they were serving, and that
492 if the majority of folks were wishing to proceed with urgent management action, it
493 would not be ethical to prevent that through continued engagement with folks who
494 would not be convinced. Rather, it was recommended to move on without the
495 denialists in the interim, and try to reach out to them again at a later date, when
496 urgent action was no longer required.

497 **Discussion**

498

499 This study has explored the meanings of ISD and its implications for invasive
500 species engagement and management. ISD has been shown to have a greater
501 variety of meanings and implications than previously explored in the literature. While
502 the research literature has previously discussed the framing of ISD as being a lack of
503 understanding of invasive species science, invasive species cynicism and invasive
504 species nihilism are arguably the most important for practitioners to understand. The
505 latter were reported far more often than views perceived as simply anti-scientific and
506 with more potentially complex impacts on engagement effectiveness and
507 management outcomes. An understanding of these ISD framings, particularly of the
508 importance of cynicism and nihilism in an ISD context, are therefore integral to
509 stakeholder communication and engagement efforts.

510

511 ***Why is it important how invasive species denialism is framed?***

512

513 The invasive species literature has mostly focused on discussing the existence and
514 implications of invasive species denialism as a form of science denialism. Our results
515 suggest that this view is an oversimplification with potential negative impacts on
516 stakeholder engagement and invasive species management communication.

517

518 General descriptions of denialists as anti-science does not address those people
519 who question invasive species based on public spending or on the likelihood of
520 success/failure of attempts to manage invasive species. All too often, academic
521 technical experts interpret invasive species management as the operationalization of
522 a scientific understanding of the risks and solutions to invasive species. Our results
523 suggest that other views about invasive species are tied to questioning societal
524 prioritisation of environmental protection, spending of public funds, and perceptions
525 of the overall effectiveness of management practices. Such views cannot simply be
526 described as denying science as they are not about, or not solely about, the science
527 of invasive species. Rather, often these views are concerned with policy implications
528 and socio-economic impacts, constituting societal domains of concern which are
529 legitimate grounds for questioning.

530

531 Generalisations appear to serve a rhetorical purpose of dismissal of contrarian
532 views, something which was of some concern to at least one interview participant.

533 This dismissal has the potential for biasing engagement efforts, or of missing
534 important input into the engagement process and resulting decision-making. It is
535 notable that when exploring their understanding of ISD, that descriptions of a person
536 who lacks understanding of science were generalised and hypothetical, rather than
537 an actual experience. Conversely, discussions of ISD that fit within the cynicism or

538 nihilism frameworks were often of specific people or groups, rooted in first-hand
539 experience. This suggests two things: the idea of the contrarian science denialist
540 appears more widespread than the denialists themselves; and, denialism rooted in
541 cynicism and nihilism appears to be a more immediate concern, particularly given
542 participants' concerns with potential impacts on those forms of ISD for future
543 management and outreach efforts. In both cases, a more nuanced view enables
544 decision-makers and science communicators to better hone their communication
545 strategies and engagement processes.

546

547 While the first framing described as invasive species denialism reflects the
548 viewpoints commonly described in the invasion ecology literature of individuals or
549 groups who do not accept invasive species science, the existence of other framings,
550 i.e., cynicism and nihilism in ISD, is an important finding. Previous published work
551 regarding ISD has often framed it as rejecting invasive species science for contrarian
552 reasons (Russell and Blackburn 2017; Ricciardi and Ryan 2018a, 2018b). We have
553 teased apart these as different aspects of ISD to show that these facets are not
554 always seen together, or in every case. Individuals who were described as not
555 believing in invasive species, or believing that we should not intervene because
556 invasive species are natural, were not described in the same way as individuals who
557 did not care about their local ecosystem, or who were perceived to be foisting their
558 costs onto others. Our results also explored a form of ISD rooted in perceptions of
559 futility not captured in descriptions of those who are denialists to be cynical or
560 contrarian. We have increased the resolution at which we can examine ISD, as
561 described by those involved in invasive species management and engagement.

562

563 This will better enable both researchers and practitioners to better understand the
564 potential meanings that these terms may hold to those they communicate with, as
565 well as to consider how the impacts of ISD on their work may differ depending on the
566 framing being employed. For example, outreach devoted to public education must
567 take time to determine precisely whether the community is open to education, and
568 what exactly they need to be educated about. For example, education devoted to
569 defining invasive species will not be as useful for convincing a laker stakeholder who
570 already knows what invasive species are that lakers are partly responsible for the
571 transport and spread of invasive species.

572

573 ***‘Opening up’ and ‘closing down’: potential responses to cynicism***

574

575 Cynicism is a broader societal problem and invasive species management must give
576 careful thought on how to handle this issue. On the one hand, there is a need to
577 ‘open up’ engagement to diverse views, including cynics, because it enables us to
578 produce more accurate science that is seen as legitimate, accountable, and allowing
579 for social empowerment (Stirling 2008). On the other hand, there is a need to ‘close-
580 down’ engagement with cynics once the basis for their views is understood,
581 discussed, and considered within an expansive view of the values and priorities held
582 by others.

583

584 Cynicism or apathy in climate denialism has been previously described not as linked
585 to a lack of scientific understanding, but to a culture of denialism where those who
586 benefit ignore the problem because “we don’t really want to know” (Norgaard 2006).

587 Participants in this study also differentiated between those expressing cynicism
588 toward management and those who did not understand or believe the science. Much
589 of invasion science practices and recommendations are rooted not in objective data,
590 but in subjective, normative values (Munro et al. 2019; Latombe et al. 2022). The fact
591 that one's values may lead one to ignore the problem of invasive species for cynical
592 gain means that conventional outreach and engagement, which tend to focus on
593 education about invasive species science, may not be sufficient to change
594 behaviours. Rather, if encountering invasive species cynicism, outreach may need to
595 pivot to focus on the way that invasive species may impact particular values.
596 However, if indeed some people 'don't really want to know', it may be best to 'move
597 on' as recommended by the focus group participants.

598 ***The Janus face of nihilism***

599
600 Nihilism can lead to reflexivity and empathy for views that question the feasibility of
601 effectively controlling invasive species. Take the example of Sea Lamprey.
602 Management of Sea Lamprey has been touted as "a remarkable success" and
603 "tremendously successful" (GLFC 2014; DFO 2018), yet at the same time eliminating
604 Sea Lamprey is described as "impossible" to the extent that management cannot be
605 relaxed for "even a short time" in the same publications. There is reason to question
606 our ability to fully prevent new invasive species, and what resistance to management
607 really means, not because of a lack of science, but because of limited resources and
608 different perceptions and evaluations of risks and impacts.

609

610 On the other hand, nihilism can become debilitating for action when action is
611 needed, feasible and desired. It can also impact managers' ability to do their work.
612 Invasive species nihilism should be particularly concerning to those involved in
613 invasive species work in that it was experienced by participants in their workplaces
614 and was expressed toward them not only from the public, but also from colleagues.
615 Research into workplace wellbeing has shown a connection between perceptions of
616 one's work as meaningless with experiences of alienation, emotional exhaustion,
617 and burnout (Bailey and Madden 2019). While research has been conducted on the
618 impacts of emotional exhaustion in fields such as health care (Meltzer and Huckabay
619 2004), the emotional labour cost of those in the invasive species community
620 confronted with nihilistic comments on a regular basis about their work remains
621 unexplored. More research is needed to fully measure and comprehend the impacts
622 of invasive species nihilism on invasive species practitioners and their work.

623

624 Nihilism is often expressed as something being a waste; a waste of resources, a
625 waste of effort, a waste of time. Some of our participants expressed that, even were
626 resources unlimited, they would still not support management of every invasive
627 species in the region. This suggests that it is not solely the limited nature of what is
628 being wasted, which is the underpinning concern for this form of denialism, but rather
629 the concept of waste itself; the perception that the effort of management is, at least
630 in some cases, itself wasteful and therefore not worth doing, even if what is being
631 wasted were unlimited. This idea of invasive species research and management
632 being perceived as a type of inherent waste should be examined further, particularly
633 as it may relate to inaction or resistance to other types of environmental research
634 and management.

635 **Strengths and limitations**

636

637 This research has delved deeper into the growing and controversial topic of invasive
638 species denialism. To our knowledge, this is the first study to include Great Lakes
639 community members to determine what the term “invasive species denialism” means
640 to them, and how it is being used by decision-makers or practitioners in the field. Our
641 results have shown that ISD is a term with different meanings with different
642 connotations. As a result, we have also shown that the implications of different types
643 of ISD, and the appropriate responses to each, differ as well. This research will
644 contribute to growing efforts to better understand the topic of ISD and provide solid
645 strategies to outreach and engagement professionals encountering different
646 framings of ISD during their work.

647

648 This research was conducted amongst members of the aquatic invasive species
649 community of the Great Lakes basin. Therefore, it is unclear whether the framings of
650 ISD employed by participants are due to a unique perspective of people in this
651 region, or whether they can be generalised to the overall invasive species
652 community. More research should be conducted specifically exploring the ways that
653 other communities describe the phenomena of ISD and its impacts to determine how
654 widespread are these framings, particularly that of invasive species nihilism, due to
655 its novelty.

656 **Conclusions**

657

658 Familiarity with the framings of ISD are important both to understand the values and
659 motivations that drive those who espouse views perceived as denialist, as well as to
660 clarify how these individuals are either understood or dismissed in the environmental
661 decision-making process. An understanding of these framings is also vital to respond
662 to instances of ISD appropriately. Whether we are being confronted with anti-science
663 contrarianism, environmental cynicism, or outbursts of nihilism, should rightly inform
664 our responses and our strategies to counter these positions.

665

666 Future research should examine the topic of invasive species nihilism in greater
667 detail. It is currently unknown how pervasive this phenomenon is in the broader
668 invasive species community and among the public. It is also currently unknown what
669 the impacts of exposure to these nihilistic framings of their work may be on those
670 involved in invasive species research and management. An awareness of those
671 impacts will help us to better understand the role of ISD in invasive species
672 communication and engagement.

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