

Preface

My father and I were sitting on the balcony outside our second-floor hotel room looking out over the central square of the oldest part of Panama City. It was April of 1995. I was almost halfway through my two-year volunteer service in the Peace Corps. My family was visiting me for a couple of weeks, and we were talking about what I might do after I went home.

"I have this idea," my father said. "Do you want to write a book together?" I looked at him.

"I'm serious," he said. "The biocontrol textbook that Bellows and I have been working on is almost done, and I've got an idea for another book—something about invasive species. Maybe for a general audience, instead of a textbook. What do you think?"

I looked at him. *Me? Write a book?* A bachelor's degree in environmental studies and a couple years of leading environmental education workshops in Panama somehow seemed a little less than adequate preparation for writing a book. Besides, I knew next to nothing about invasive species. How was I supposed to write intelligently about something I'd never really paid much attention to?

Nevertheless, we pulled out a notepad and worked out a few ideas.

This might be interesting, I thought.

After I came home from the Peace Corps in 1996, my father and I spent the better part of a year tossing around ideas and writing outlines. We decided to write the book in two distinct styles: first-person-narrative case studies that told stories about invasive species problems around the country, and expository essay-style chapters that provided depth and background. I was to research and write the case studies, my father would write the other half of the book, and we would edit each other's work until the whole thing spoke with a single voice. It sounded like a workable plan.

I spent most of April and May 1997 on the phone, setting up the interviews and site visits that were to form the basis of the case studies. Then, at the beginning of June, I hit the road for three months with one basic question in mind: How did each of the invaders we'd chosen affect the ecology of specific places and the lives of the people who lived there? Sixteen thousand miles and nearly a hundred interviews later, I still didn't have any answers. But I was beginning to get a sense of the big picture, and I didn't like what I saw.

We worked intermittently on the book over the next year or so. I collected articles and books, wrote outlines, and paced the house muttering to myself about latency periods and pest risk assessments. Soon my desk was overflowing with papers and notes and exclamations. The project became all consuming. All of these invasive pests added up to a catastrophe far larger than I had first imagined, and what began as a few scrawled notes on a yellow lined pad turned into the most urgently important thing I've ever done.