

Solutions in Need of Solutions

By Dennis Knight

Do you need a hearty cover plant to prevent soil erosion and maybe feed the cows, too? One solution might be kudzu, a Japanese native that was introduced to the U.S. in 1876 as an ornamental shade and distributed to farmers as a cover plant and high-protein cattle fodder. It was so popular with our government that the Soil Erosion Services promoted its use to help control erosion of slopes, distributing and funding the planting of eighty-five million seedlings. Then, as the boll weevil and failure of cotton crops drove farmers off the land and into the cities, the kudzu was left behind unchecked and flourishing in the climate of our deep south. Now it covers over seven million acres, has become known as "the vine that ate the south", and can grow by up to one foot in a day.

One need only drive through the southern states to see how the solution has become the problem. Kudzu covers everything in sight from the road, from barrow pit to fences, and up telephone poles. Even the lines overhead are covered in thick, green leaves. It's beautiful to those who love monochromatic scenery, but the ecological damage is immense. The invasive kudzu out-competes with native flora for light by growing over them and shading them with their leaves, leaving them to suffocate.

In short, kudzu is an example of a solution that created a problem. Our environment is rife with them. In Australia in the first decades of the twentieth century, cane toads were introduced into sugar cane plantations of Queensland to control insect pests, and by 1937 over sixty thousand young toads had been released. That experiment failed because the sugar cane fields didn't provide enough protection for the toads, yet the toads thrived because any predators in Australia die from a toxin the toads excrete, and they have not adapted to it. The cane toad is big, up to fifteen inches long, and it is considered a "feral species" that will eat most anything around, dead or alive, and has no natural predators itself.

In 2010, *Time* featured a list of the world's ten most dangerous invasive species. They included kudzu and cane toads, and added rabbits, Asian carp, gray squirrels, killer bees, starlings, a fish called the northern snakehead, zebra mussels and a ferocious snake called the Burmese python that has been known to swallow five foot alligators in the Florida Everglades. Many of these invaders were deliberately introduced into the environment as a solution to a problem.

Throughout history, our world has constantly faced challenges to our environment, and we have put our brightest scientists to work on solving them. But once in a while, a perfectly lovely solution devolves into yet another problem. It is a laughing matter neither to scientists nor to my fellow citizens of the Earth. But I am a humorist, and little is more appealing to me than a nice case of kudzu.