

St. Patrick, Snakes, and Ants

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This article is the twelfth in a year-long series about economics and holidays.

Saint Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. He is famous for bringing Christianity to Ireland, and also for getting rid of the snakes in Ireland. (Some skeptics believe that there never were snakes in Ireland, and that the legend refers to driving out the Druids, for whom the snake was a symbol.) In addition to Ireland, he is the unlikely patron saint of the small city of Loiza, Puerto Rico. An invasion of ants in the 18th century led the local Catholic parish to cast lots for a saint to whom to pray to rid them, and the lots fell on Saint Patrick. Most locals has never heard of him, but they cast twice more and each time it came up Saint Patrick. Sp they prayed to Saint Patrick, and the ants disappeared. Their local church is called the Church of Saint Patrick and the Holy Spirit.

Snakes in Ireland and ants in Loiza were not invasive species. Ants were native to Loiza, and snakes may or may not have ever have been found in Ireland. If there were, there would have been consequences of driving them away--probably unchecked growth in the population of nuisance species in Ireland that were food for snakes. We do know some of the consequences of invasive species elsewhere, from rabbits in Australia to Asian carp in the Great Lakes to pythons in Florida. The melaleuca tree in the Everglades has been sucking up water at an excessive rate ever since they were introduced decades ago, and its spread is very hard to control. Introducing a species from a place where their population is kept under control by predators or other natural forces factors into an environment where there are no predators or natural controls can have dire consequences for competing species, including humans.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are endangered species, who are accorded special protection in order to ensure their survival. Some of them have made a comeback, like the California condor and the buffalo. Others have affected human activity in ways that cost jobs and limit our use of valuable resources. Just ask the loggers in the northwest about the spotted owl and the neighbors of the snail darter in Tennessee where this tiny species held up the construction of the Tellico dam. But as we learn more about the interdependence of living being in the ecosystem, we also become more aware of the potential risks from eliminating any particular species through human carelessness or intent. Deforestation in the tropical rain forests has probably cost us many species of plants and animals, and many of the plants in particular have potential medical uses.

Both invasive species and legislation protecting endangered species illustrate of the law of unintended consequences. We pass laws and regulations, change the tax code, introduce new programs, and pat ourselves on the back for doing good things. Only later do we discover that these changes have consequences—some good, some not so good. The consequence of property tax relief in many states in the last 20 years has been a significant loss of education funding and pressure on state budgets when the next recession came along. The consequence of bank deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s will be with us for some time to come. Humans don't have perfect foresight, so we pass laws that seem to be

eminently sensible or at least harmless at the time, only to lead to harmful consequences years and sometimes decades later. The same is true of laws restricting the importation of alien species and protecting endangered species.

Law and economics have a love-hate relationship. Laws provide the framework within which we operate, assured that contracts will be enforced, rights will be protected and order will mostly prevail. But laws tend to have an absolute quality, at least as they are written. Economists approach conflicts more in terms of case-by-case decisions, weighing costs and benefits, looking for win-win outcomes and negotiated settlements. In practice, so do judges as they interpret the law and try to balance the rights of conflicting parties. There are gradual modifications in common law over the decades as judges interpret the law in the light of a changing environment. Perhaps the endangered species can be coaxed into an alternative or narrower habitat. Perhaps we can confine the alien species in a way that keeps them from wreaking havoc with a fragile ecosystem, and learn from our experience to more effectively regulate imports of new species with unknown risks. There is a valued place for both approaches in a democratic market system, the absoluteness of law and the situation ethics of economics.

As we wear the green on March 17th, so close to the spring equinox, we know that the color represents not only Saint Patrick and Ireland but also the green of spring and the natural environment. This habitat is something that we all depend on and need to protect, through both laws and thoughtful choices about how we treat the other species with whom we share this green earth.

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