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Beetle could spell death for hardwoods

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By Hart Seely
Staff writer

In just six years, a Chinese beetle with a craving for maple trees has become the worst-case scenario for practically every hardwood in the Northeast.

"If the Asian long-horned beetle ever gets up into Adirondacks, it could cause some of the greatest changes to our forest than anything it's seen, except for glaciation," said Donald J. Leopold, State University of New York Environmental Science and Forestry professor of forest and wetland ecology.

Scary words, indeed. And Leopold is not alone. The U.S. Department of Agriculture plans to spend \$300 million in an all-out war on the beetle, which has turned up in several locations around New York City.

Since 1996, when the beetle was found in Brooklyn, the government has imposed a "slash and burn" campaign. When it's detected, trees in the immediate area are cut, chipped and burned. Thus far, more than 7,000 have been destroyed.

The government has imposed a 120-mile quarantine around New York City. In some areas, entomologists have rigged trees with acoustic sensors in hopes of detecting the distinct sound of the beetle munching.

Unlike many insects which confine themselves to one species, the Asian beetle dines on healthy poplars, birches, elms, ashes, chestnuts and willows - though its favorite by far is maple. In China, where the beetle wreaked havoc, managers of poplar plantations were said to plant maples to attract the beetle, so it could be killed.

The insect bores into a tree, lays eggs and establishes a colony, beyond the reach of insecticides or predators. When the eggs hatch, the adults fly off to a new tree.

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Officials believe it came to America in packing crates from China or Hong Kong.

"This is the downside to global trade," said ESF professor Stephen Teale, who studied the beetle.

In recent decades, other invasive species such as the gypsy moth, zebra mussel and the chestnut blight have become ecological nightmares.

"Some people say this (beetle) would kill every sugar maple in New York state, and that's 20 percent of all the trees," Leopold said. "And that's not just in the forest. That's in every park, and in every neighborhood, and not just in New York, but the entire eastern United States.

"I have been studying natural disturbances my whole career," he said. "As far as the forests are concerned, this is one of the scariest things I've ever heard."

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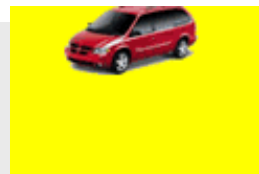
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