



Uninvited Guests: Invasive Animals

- 1 Toads can be a big problem. No, they can't *really* give you warts . . . but their toxic venom *can* hurt your pets and other animals living nearby. The cane toad is one of many **invasive species** that pose a threat to some ecosystems. But what *is* an invasive species?



Cane toads can harm the ecosystem.

- 2 **Invasive species** are harmful plants, animals, and other living organisms that are not native to an area. The species that are naturally found in an area are **native species**. **Non-native species** live in areas where they *aren't* naturally found. Not *all* non-native species are harmful. However, once they take over and cause harm to an ecosystem, they're considered invasive species.
- 3 You might be wondering what makes something harmful to an **ecosystem**. An ecosystem is a community of organisms interacting with their environment. One important factor in an ecosystem is the **food web**. Food webs show different organisms and what they eat. Invasive species like cane toads can harm non-native ecosystems because they *aren't* a natural part of the food web.



- 4 Cane toads eat a variety of things, including plants, insects, and even small birds and mammals. But in their normal range, cane toads have several natural **predators** including snakes and eels that eat *them*. In non-native areas, cane toads still eat a diverse diet, but there are no natural predators to eat the cane toads! With no predators to eat them, the cane toad population increases, and the availability of their food sources decreases. The ecosystem can quickly become out of balance.
- 5 Unfortunately, cane toads aren't the only invasive animals that can harm ecosystems. The **Burmese python** is a large snake that has taken over parts of the Everglades in Florida. Pythons have disrupted the food chain by eating many native animals who live there. They also have large bodies and sharp teeth that can harm people. Additionally, **tiger mosquitoes** are considered one of the most dangerous invasive species. They carry diseases that can make people very sick. Their dangerous bite can also harm other animals in an ecosystem such as deer and birds.
- 6 Not all non-native animals are harmful. For example, most honeybees are not native to North America. However, they are important pollinators who help plants like fruits and vegetables to grow. By learning more about native, non-native, and invasive species, everyone can help keep our ecosystems healthy.