Examining a potential brown treesnake transport pathway: shipments from Guam

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Abstract: Shipments of cargo and household goods have been identified as pathways for brown treesnake (Boiga irregularis) transport from Guam to other locations. We analyzed data regarding shipments of military household goods leaving Guam during 2006 to 2009 to identify the potential for human transport of brown treesnakes to the United States by determining when shipments most commonly occur and identifying primary receiving areas. We found that the number of shipments was highest during the months of May and June and that California receives more shipments (23% of total shipments) than any other location. Approximately 98% of shipments originated from the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force, with naval shipments increasing over time. Guam is currently undergoing a military buildup during which shipments are expected to increase, suggesting the need for increased vigilance and prioritization of inspection efforts.

Key words: Boiga irregularis, brown treesnake, Guam, human–wildlife conflicts, inspection, invasive species, pathway, shipment

Brown treesnakes (Boiga irregularis) arrived on the Pacific island of Guam when a snake originating from the Admiralty Islands, north of Papua New Guinea, was unloaded from a cargo ship berthed in Apra Harbor following World War II (Rodda et al. 1992). Since that time, the Brown treesnake has had numerous detrimental ecological and economic effects and has become one of the most damaging invasive species in the world (Rodda and Fritts 1992, Bradshaw et al. 2009).

Guam is a small island of approximately 544 km² and is the largest, southernmost island in the Mariana Islands archipelago (Central Intelligence Agency 2010). It is a major hub for both civilian and military transport, allowing snakes to hitchhike unnoticed to a wide diversity of destinations (Fritts et al. 1999). Perry and Vice (2009) assessed the potential for survival of Brown treesnake in the transportation network and predicted elevated risk of establishment on some other islands. The generalist diet and reproductive capabilities of Brown treesnake increase the possibility of successful establishment in other locations (Savidge 1988, Perry and Vice 2009, Aldridge et al. 2010, Mathies et al. 2010).

A large-scale military buildup on Guam, known as the Guam and Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Military Relocation, is currently underway. It will involve movement of troops from Japan and elsewhere to Guam and creation of a new berth in Guam’s Apra Harbor (Department of Defense 2010). This relocation is expected to include a population increase of almost 80,000 on Guam at some points, with an increase of approximately 33,000 people over the long term (Department of Defense 2010, Government Accountability Office 2011). This represents a population increase of up to 18.5% compared to the current population estimates (Central Intelligence Agency 2010) and doubtlessly will result in a greatly increased volume of cargo shipments to and from Guam. The greater rate of transport will increase the risk of brown
treesnake stowaways, with commensurate risk of the snakes’ establishment elsewhere (G. Perry, Texas Tech University, unpublished data).

Few, if any, areas of the world are completely protected from the introduction of non-native species (Mack et al. 2000). Transoceanic shipping is a classic vector for invasive species introduction to the continental United States. However, every potential vector of invasive species introduction requires expert evaluation, as there is no single strategy for stopping an introduced species once it has arrived (Simberloff et al. 2005). Although Perry and Vice (2009) examined the number, frequency, and destination countries of large vessels leaving Guam, they did not look at the final destinations of those shipments. Brown treesnakes have an affinity for small, dark spaces (Pendleton 1947) and may not exit a container at its initial point of arrival. It is, therefore, important for risk assessment to determine where every package is opened, rather than just the location of where it enters a country (Figure 1).

We fear that the establishment of brown treesnakes on other islands will increase the risk of future invasion to the U.S. mainland (Perry and Vice 2009; G. Perry, Texas Tech University, unpublished data). Our goal was to define locations with high potential for brown treesnake arrival and introduction. We obtained data on inspections of outgoing military and commercial shipments from Guam, focusing on cargo and household goods which are of especially high concern (Perry and Vice 2009) and which are expected to see a particularly large increase as a result of the ongoing troop buildup on Guam. We chose to use inspections because the inspection forms provided us with the most comprehensive data collection system available for information on all shipments leaving the island, including date, destination, weight, military organization, and available information on cargo type.

Many household goods shipments from Guam enter continental United States through 1 military port in Long Beach, California. We, therefore, hypothesized that areas in the southern coastal United States receive more shipments from Guam than from other locations. However, many vessels leaving Guam carry sealed containers going to multiple final destinations. The shipments are not completely broken down until they reach their final destination. Therefore, it was necessary to examine the final destinations of those shipments, rather than just ports of entry, to examine propagule pressure (i.e., the distribution of propagule size and patterns of arrival). Analyzing the shipment dates allowed us to determine whether or not shipments increase during a certain time of year and whether the number or weight of shipments has changed over several years. Knowledge of the timing of shipments and who is responsible for those shipments (i.e., what military branch they are coming from) potentially would provide cause for supplementing inspection personnel at a certain time or military base or making general changes in inspection protocol.

Methods

We collected inspection data from USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services (WS) on Guam for military shipments from January 2006 through September 2009. Data included shipment inspection date, final destination, total shipment weight, and military organization associated with the shipment. We also obtained data on the number of inspections of all military and commercial aircraft, vehicles, warehouses, and pallets that were inspected during October 2005 to September 2010 and data on all military and commercial aircraft, cargo, and household goods that left Guam without inspection during October 2005 to September 2008. To assist in identifying risk factors, we acquired data about snake captures by WS employees during spotlighting and trapping procedures (fiscal years 2007–2010), and for inspections (fiscal years 2009–2010).
Statistical analyses

We used a generalized mixed model approach (PROC MIXED; Littell et al. 2006) to examine variation in the number and weight of shipments inspected over time (by month, year, and a month × year interaction) and by military branch. We excluded shipments where the military branch was unknown; additionally, data for shipments by the U.S. Air Force in May 2007 were missing. To account for non-independence of multiple shipments to each destination over time, we treated destinations as subjects, examined 5 covariance structures (compound symmetric, first-order autoregressive, first-order autoregressive moving average, toeplitz, and variance components), and selected one based on values of Akaike’s information criterion adjusted for small sample bias (AICc; Littell et al. 2006). We log-transformed the number of shipments and weight of shipments to better meet model assumptions. We presented raw means and confidence intervals for shipments and weight of shipments by month and year. We calculated raw means of shipment numbers using all potential destinations that received shipments at any time during the study period though not necessarily having received a shipment every month. We used descriptive statistics to rank final destinations, based on cumulative number of shipments and total shipment weight per destination per year, to compute sums total number of shipments by military branch and types of inspections performed and to describe missed inspections by WS employees.

Results

The 5 states that received the most shipments from Guam during 2006 to 2009 were California, Virginia, Florida, Texas, and Washington (Table 1). Of the total 1,259 destinations for shipments leaving Guam, San Diego, California, had a higher cumulative number of shipments than any other destination (Table 1).

The number (F_{30, 3800} = 3.01, P < 0.0001) and weight (F_{30, 3800} = 2.53, P < 0.0001) of shipments differed by month and year (year × month). The average number of shipments per month across all destinations peaked in May and June in 2006 ($\bar{x} = 0.23$, 95% CI = 0.18–0.28 and $\bar{x} = 0.25$, 95% CI = 0.19–0.3 shipments, respectively) and then again in May and June in 2008 (0.22, 0.17–0.27 and 0.24, 0.19–0.29, respectively). The low means for number of shipments per month were driven by the likelihood that any 1 destination having received a shipment in any particular month was fairly low. The weight of shipments also peaked in May and June in 2006 ($\bar{x} = 382$, 95% CI = 295–465 and $\bar{x} = 431$, 95% CI = 328–535 kg, respectively) and in 2008 (372, 276–469 and 391, 294–487 kg, respectively). There was a peak in January of 2009 in the number of shipments ($\bar{x} = 0.18$, 95% CI = 0.13–0.23) followed by a drop in shipment number ($\bar{x} = 0.03$, 95% CI = 0.02–0.04) and weight ($\bar{x} = 58$, 95% CI = 33–83 kg) of shipments in September 2009.

The number and weight of shipments received at each destination differed by military branch ($F_{3, 263} = 44.00$, $P < 0.0001$ and $F_{3, 263} = 43.41$, $P < 0.0001$ respectively). Of the 9,339 inspections performed by WS between January 2006 and September 2009, 97% were for U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force shipments, which tended to peak during mid-summer (Figure 2).

Between October 2005 to September 2008, 5,635 aircraft, cargo, and household goods items were scheduled for inspection, but were not inspected. Of those, 18% occurred in May (95% CI 16.9–18.9) and 10% occurred in June (95% CI: 9.6–11.2), when cargo volumes were highest (Figure 2). The largest number of missed inspections (2,167) occurred in 2007, but dropped to the lowest value the following year, with only 716 in 2008. Military and commercial items accounted for 59% and 41% of missed inspections, respectively. Most missed inspection items had stateside destinations (56%), with 27% of those going to California. A total of 33% of unintentionally missed inspections had destinations in Micronesia, 3% in Europe, and ≤1% in other countries. Although Hawaii was not ranked among the top 10 locations receiving shipments from Guam, 143 household goods shipments destined for Hawaii were inspected between January 2006 and September 2009, and a total of 233 flights, vehicles, pallets, or household goods shipments destined for Hawaii left Guam uninspected between October 2005 and September 2008 (4% of the all missed inspections). No single trend was apparent in inspections over time from 2006 to 2010 (Table 2). Household goods inspections peaked in 2010, aircraft inspections were highest in 2006, vehicle inspections peaked
Table 1. Top 15 ranked final destinations for outgoing shipment inspections performed by USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services on Guam for January 2006 to September 2009 by total weight and cumulative number of shipments. Potential for human assisted translocation of brown treesnakes is highest in these locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weight rank</th>
<th>Number of shipments rank</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Weight (kg)</th>
<th>Number of shipments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>San Diego, Calif.</td>
<td>351,046</td>
<td>353,048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Benicia, Calif.</td>
<td>203,595</td>
<td>102,285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Norfolk, Va.</td>
<td>118,916</td>
<td>140,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jacksonville, Fla.</td>
<td>100,017</td>
<td>72,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>San Antonio, Tex.</td>
<td>111,547</td>
<td>86,024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Arlington, Va.</td>
<td>62,392</td>
<td>97,817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Virginia Beach, Va.</td>
<td>70,125</td>
<td>93,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Oak Harbor, Wash.</td>
<td>40,007</td>
<td>73,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Groton, Conn.</td>
<td>59,965</td>
<td>42,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pensacola, Fla.</td>
<td>45,722</td>
<td>31,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Coronado, Calif.</td>
<td>63,684</td>
<td>82,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bremerton, Wash.</td>
<td>44,157</td>
<td>69,377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Great Lakes, Ill.</td>
<td>42,524</td>
<td>39,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hampton, Va.</td>
<td>41,277</td>
<td>30,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>N. Las Vegas, Nev.</td>
<td>39,179</td>
<td>43,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in 2009, and warehouse inspections generally appeared to increase over time, but this was not part of our analysis.

Snake spotlighting in military housing on Guam by WS employees resulted in a peak of 562 brown treesnake captures; trapping in military housing resulted in a peak of 2,697 captures in 2010 (Table 3). Wildlife Services employees reported finding 7 snakes during inspections of military and commercial items in fiscal year 2009 and 2 snakes in fiscal year 2010.

### Discussion

International and transoceanic shipping and trade have increased across time, and this has pushed risk assessment for invasive species to the forefront of the prevention efforts (Hulme 2009). Because successful eradication of an invasive species is rare (Mack et al. 2000), it is important to employ prevention efforts, rather than rely on post-facto responses (Bax et al. 2001). Better knowledge of where Guam’s cargo goes and how it is inspected is crucial for improving biosecurity. Our study helps identify not only the ports through which material from Guam enters the United States, but also the final destinations where it is unpacked and the times of year that it is most likely to be in transit. Alarmingly, we also found that thousands of uninspected items leave Guam for the continental United States and Hawaii. Because Hawaii is already considered an at-risk location for brown treesnake introduction (Kraus and Cravalho 2001, Rödder and Lötters 2010), we found that during our study period most shipments with Hawaiian destinations left Guam without inspection.

All items leaving Guam during the summer season (late May through mid-August) should be considered high-priority for inspection. Although many of the reasons for items leaving Guam uninspected are uncontrollable by WS, increases in the number of inspections performed, especially during the peak months of May and June and to the locations we have identified as receiving the most shipments, will likely be needed to decrease the likelihood of brown treesnake transport. Over time, spikes in shipment numbers may occur due to increases in military personnel movement between bases, but with continuous collection and analysis of shipping data, these changes can become more manageable.

The traditional model of invasive species interdiction relies solely on centralized inspection locations and organizations providing such inspections. Inspection programs on Guam and mainland ports of entry clearly have great value, as indicated by the repeated capture of brown treesnakes in military housing and cargo on Guam. Nonetheless, areas that receive

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**Table 2.** Total number of inspections performed by USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Service employees on Guam for Fiscal years 2006–2010. HHG = household goods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal year</th>
<th>Aircraft</th>
<th>HHG</th>
<th>Vehicles</th>
<th>Warehouses</th>
<th>Pallets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6304</td>
<td>2294</td>
<td>3176</td>
<td>6079</td>
<td>127,435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>5746</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>2695</td>
<td>5672</td>
<td>157,831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5149</td>
<td>1826</td>
<td>3604</td>
<td>6189</td>
<td>167,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5429</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>5064</td>
<td>7332</td>
<td>169,232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5535</td>
<td>2620</td>
<td>3977</td>
<td>7960</td>
<td>164,467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** Number of brown tree snakes captured by USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services employees during spotlighting and trapping procedures in military housing areas on Guam for Fiscal years 2007-2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spotlighting</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trapping</td>
<td>2604</td>
<td>2639</td>
<td>2624</td>
<td>2697</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
substantial cargo from Guam and are at high risk of snake establishment might choose to make incoming shipments from Guam an inspection priority. We suggest that a modification of the local response model proposed by Perry and Farmer (2011) might offer a cost-effective choice. Our data highlight potential propagule pressure and points of entry for brown treesnakes, which are key components in mapping of risk in order to aid prevention (Hulme 2009). Identification of hotspots for brown treesnake arrival can be used to pinpoint locations where rapid-response members and public education are needed to increase the potential for early detection, as it is best to pursue exotics immediately following the first sighting (Bright 1999, Perry and Farmer 2011). According to our analysis, San Diego has received more than twice as many shipments as any other location, and it should, therefore, be considered a prime location for prevention efforts to take place.

We suggest that future studies examine the transportation network and include other possible origin points for brown treesnake incursion. Brown treesnakes are not the only species that may disperse through these transportation routes. For example, several exotic amphibian species have become established on Guam (Christy et al. 2007), and those, potentially, could also disperse. A broader focus would also be useful in preventing future species introductions due to the increasing human and cargo movements with the current military relocation (Wisniewski 2010).

Management implications
Most of the top destinations for shipments are located in coastal areas that have been identified as high risk for the establishment of brown treesnakes if accidently introduced (Wisniewski 2010). Shipments, flights, and cargo going to these destinations should become priority for inspection purposes, both prior to leaving Guam and again at its final destination.

Our evaluation will be useful in a more finely tuned risk assessment for brown treesnakes and can be used to assist Guam-based WS in maximizing efficiency during times, both when most shipments leave the island and other inspections at locations that receive the most shipments. Shipments, flights, and cargo going to the destinations specified in this report should become priority for inspection purposes.
Acknowledgments

We thank USDA/APHIS/Wildlife Services on Guam for assistance with data collection and access. We thank L. Brennan and M. Tewes for comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. Funding was provided by the North America Brown Treesnake Control Team through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University–Kingsville, and the Hispanic Leaders in Agriculture and the Environment fellowship. This is manuscript number 12-118 of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute.

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