

Introduced Species:

Before 1985, there were no zebra mussels in North America. Now, these small clam-like animals live throughout the Great Lakes and have made their way to other bodies of fresh water - including all the way down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Scientists think these European invaders most likely arrived here in the ballast tanks of freighters. Ships filled their ballast tanks with water in Europe and took on tiny, free-swimming zebra mussel larvae as well. When the ships arrived in the Great Lakes, they emptied their tanks to take on cargo, flushing the young zebra mussels out into a new world. Now, the mussels are causing a big problem, including killing native clams by growing on top of them and sinking buoys that help ships navigate.

When species like the zebra mussel end up in areas where they don't occur naturally, people refer to them as introduced, alien, or exotic species. And like the zebra mussel, many introduced species end up causing big problems in their new homes. That's because they usually arrive without the predators, diseases, or parasites that kept their populations in check in their natural habitats. In addition, the new species can often survive better than native species in areas that have been disturbed by people. And native species often have no defenses against introduced species - or the diseases they carry.