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Water Hyacinth—Double Edged

Note: Thanks to scholar Jeremiah Kitunda for this extended response to an earlier entry (January 31, 2005). The detailed information here warrants a post of its own. In the interest of building an online library, The Human Flower Project welcomes inquiries and corrections.

You'll find lots more about this plant at [Jennifer Orth's Invasive Species Weblog](#). JA



Harvesting water hyacinth, Lake Victoria
Photo: [Aquarius Systems](#)

By [Jeremiah Kitunda](#)
Appalachian State University

In response to [Water Hyacinth—Africa's Not So Pretty Settler](#) I would like to suggest some corrections with regard to the history of this plant (*Eichhornia Crassipes*) in Africa and elsewhere. My main point of contention is your statement that water hyacinth spread from Brazil in the 19th century and reached Africa in the 1980s.

Rather than being limited to Brazil, this plant has a [wide range](#) in South America including Jamaica, Venezuela, and Peru. Through circumstantial evidence and cross-examination of secondary sources, I have come to the conclusion that European explorers had seen and probably carried *Eichhornia Crassipes* from South America to Europe and Africa between the 16th and 17th centuries. It is evident that the plant was in Europe by the early 18th century, and I surmise that European travelers to Africa at the time had also taken it to African islands of the Indian and Atlantic oceans, as well as the Niger, Congo and Nile River valleys. Contrary to the claim of your website, it is therefore noteworthy that *Eichhornia Crassipes* reached Africa as early as the late 18th century.

French Botanist Alire Raffeneau-Delile was cultivating that plant in Egypt by the late 1790s under the auspices of Empress Josephine and Emperor Napoleon (who occupied Egypt between 1797 and 1807). Delile had probably obtained seeds or seedlings sent to Josephine from Amazonia by Alexander Von Humboldt and Aime Bonpland, who went out collecting specimens along the Orinoco River—a tributary of Amazon—between 1790 and 1800. Botanist Delile was instrumental in the expansion of a French network of Botanical Gardens (and Amazonian plants) across Africa, the most imminent extensions being those of the King's Garden and Montpellier Botanical Gardens to the African islands and the Nile Valley.

Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia Crassipes*)
Photo: [teninoue](#)

The plant was given its current names—Water hyacinth and *Eichhornia Crassipes*—in Europe in the early 19th century, its botanical name honoring Prussian Minister of Education, Culture and Medicine, John Albert Friedrich Eichhorn. The existence of other names, prior to the 19th century, makes the study of this plant's origin and dispersal an intractable endeavor to environmental historians. [See sources at "Continue Reading"]

After the French departure from Egypt, records indicate that British naturalists continued the cultivation of water hyacinth in Egypt. By the 1850s Agricultural Officer

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Mr. Birdwood was cultivating water hyacinth along the Nile. By the 1870s water hyacinth emerged as an ecological disaster in Egypt as it would be soon in other parts of the world as well.

Between 1880 and 1980, water hyacinth appeared as an ecological nuisance in many parts of Africa. It caused a popular crisis in South

Africa in the 1910s, Madagascar in the 1920s, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya in the 1930s through the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, water hyacinth bloomed heavily on Lake Victoria, the Nile, the Congo and almost all watercourses of Africa.

Why did biologists, botanists, and travelers carry water hyacinth to Africa between the 16th and the 20th centuries? How did they carry and tend it? Can we peg down the earliest dates, specific points of introduction and pathways of dispersal in Africa? These are hard questions to answer given the dearth of evidence. However, it is worth mentioning that several institutions were instrumental to the transfer of biota between Africa and other continents before the 20th century.

First, Christian missionaries, particularly Catholic missionaries, brought to Africa their long-standing tradition of collecting and carrying with them exotic plants and growing them in mission stations that they established in foreign lands. Jesuits, Capuchin, and the White Fathers missionaries are said to have introduced water hyacinth in the offshore islands of Africa from the early 17th century onward. Around 1900 the White Fathers introduced water hyacinth in Rwanda, at the headwaters of the Kagera River, which drains into Lake Victoria and exits the lake as the Nile River.

The second important institution in the transfer of water hyacinth to Africa was the network of botanical gardens and fish hatcheries that Europeans established in Africa from the middle of the 17th century. Subsequently, navigation activities between various European missionary or botanical stations promoted accidental spread of water hyacinth along the African water courses. From an early date European armies discovered that in addition to its aesthetic value, water hyacinth could be employed as a military asset to enhance camouflage in battlefields. In Eastern Africa surviving veterans of the two World Wars recall using water hyacinth mats for that purpose in South East Asia, and when the war was over they carried the plant abroad.

The third factor in the spread of water hyacinth in Africa was a network of museums, which emerged in the 19th century. Early samples of water hyacinth are still available in museum herbaria in Africa. The plants escaped from these herbaria to the open water in the 20th century, but mere escape was not enough to allow the plant to proliferate. Another set of factors—change in hydrology and chemistry of African water courses—promoted the expansion of small amounts of water hyacinth to crisis levels.

Over the years of its existence in Africa, water hyacinth oscillated from a crop to a weed and back. That is to say, while the majority of scientists see water hyacinth as a noxious weed posing an ecological disaster on pristine aquatic environments, many locals have taken water hyacinth as an economic opportunity. Programs to remove the plants have employed thousands of people who were jobless before. But there have been other, more important advantages to Lake Victoria's shoreline residents.

Furniture of water hyacinth
made in Vietnam
Photo: [VVG Vietnam/Handicrafts](#)

Members of several women's groups and handicapped groups that I interviewed in 2001-2002 had come together to form "Community Based Organizations" (CBOs) to harvest and process water hyacinth and manufacture a variety of exotic products:

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paper, from which the CBOs make books (I have several samples; my current diary 2005-2006 is made of water hyacinth paper!), pulp, cards, lampshades, excellent furniture, baskets, footwear, cordage, fodder for animals, and gas. Along the Nile, water hyacinth is turned into ropes, which are used to make makeshift bridges across the mighty river. I have heard that some people have experimented with water hyacinth as a substitute for tea and will confirm this during my forthcoming trip to Lake Victoria.



While scientists claim that water hyacinth kills fish and other aquatic species, in the 1990s locals testified to a spectacular return of fish species that had disappeared since the 1930s. On close examination, other researchers and I realized that hyacinth provided shelter for these species against the predatory Nile Perch, which was artificially introduced into the lake in the 1930s. Water hyacinth also provided a breeding ground for the endangered species. The residents claim that between the 1930s and 1970s policy makers advocated the removal of floating islands (locally called Abuoro), which though an impediment to navigation, were the breeding ground for those fish species. Clearly, people who live along Lake Victoria see water hyacinth as a double-edged sword of nature.

[1] The following texts provide excellent information on this topic as well as a discussion over the origin, native and adventive distribution of water hyacinth. Gopal, Brijji, *Aquatic Plants Studies 1: Water Hyacinth* (London: Elsevier, 1987), 5/43; Gopal, Brijji and K. Sharmar, *Water hyacinth (Eichhornia Crassipes), The Most Troublesome Weed of the World* (New Delhi: Hindasia, 1981); and J. H. Bosch, "The Origin and Spread of Waterhyacinth, *Eichhornia Crassipes*," (Mart.) Solms. Annual Meeting Weed Science Society of America 69 Abstract. Mea Allan, *Weeds: The Unbidden Guests in our Gardens* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 25 and Tyler Whittle, *The Plant Hunters*, 25-7.

Posted by [Julie](#) on 06/24 at 11:09 AM

Comments

Enjoyed this piece. As you might imagine, water hyacinth is very well adapted to Florida. Seems that they must be controlling it though because I don't see as much of it as I used to.

I have always had a love-hate relationship with the plant. I don't live on water so, personally, the invasiveness of water hyacinth does not affect me directly. I do of course recognize the "economic impact" but is that really an impact, or just an inconvenience to the leisure time pursuits of boaters, water skiers and fishermen? Here, it is mostly found in canals and occasionally lakes, but the latter are mostly under control.

Personally, I think water hyacinth, as an individual plant, is a grand species. The flowers are beautiful, the foliage is attractive and the plants are kind of neat as their own floating self-sustaining islands. All of the elements are in good proportion; the leaves are not too large or too many, the inflorescence is not too tall, and the flowers last long enough to not sully the inflorescence with brown senesced flowers. So what is so bad about seeing a swath of lilac occupying a drainage ditch or canal that would otherwise probably be occupied by drab flowerless hydrilla? I think the problem with water hyacinth is its fecundity. If it were rare, it would be cultivated, grown in specially designed water tubs, and treasured.
Cheers!!!

Posted by [Greg](#) on 06/25 at 03:23 PM

Looking forward to see if water hyacinth tea is in the making! Liked Greg's comment also!!

Tracy

Posted by [Tracy](#) on 06/28 at 10:21 AM

I had no idea water hyacinths were used for their pulp and fiber like this. A reader at davesgarden.com linked to your excellent website and I know I'll spend many hours reading here.

Posted by [Gardenwife](#) on 08/03 at 03:09 PM

Water hyacinths are a severe environmental and economic problem in all of the gulf coast states and in many other areas of the world with a sub-tropical or tropical climate. This species has rapidly spread throughout inland and coastal freshwater bays, lakes, and marshes in the United States and in other countries.

Posted by [Marr](#) on 04/20 at 09:48 AM

Part of Eastern Europe is producing furniture and playgrounds utilities from water hyacinths.

Posted by [diplas](#) on 05/16 at 11:15 AM

Dear Sir,

This is Rajesh Shrestha from THE LAND OF EVEREST & THE LAND OF BUDDHA.

We are doing some ecological projects too. you may visit

<http://www.ecofarmnepal.com>

Please let me know WATER HYACINTH' S MEDICINAL VALUE ? IS IT GOOD TO EAT FOR MAN?

Thank you very much

Rajesh Shrestha

Posted by [Rajesh Shrestha](#) on 07/23 at 12:38 PM

I wonder why the states who deal with such a problem with their invasiveness don't use them as raw materials as in these examples. They're a completely renewable resource (like kudzu, LOL!).

Posted by [gw](#) on 09/21 at 09:25 PM

I was wondering where I might get harvested water hyacinth for a few (small scale) home crafts/experiments? Can you buy it in coils like basket weaving reed?

I actually read an article telling youths in Mississippi how to make paper out of harvested kudzu.

Posted by [Sally](#) on 10/21 at 08:30 AM

dear sir,

i am a research student working on bio control of water hyacinth and its application in phytoremediation.if this noxious weed can be used as a raw material in furniture making,in paper industry,in medicines and as fodder for cattles then we can minimize the menace caused by this world's worst weed.

Posted by [Ram Vallabh Mishra](#) on 11/26 at 01:38 PM

<http://hyacinth.ebigchina.com>

We are from Shanghai China.Water Hyacinth Series Products Development Deeply Base on the Concept of Recycling

While it is at the season when a worldwide harmful plant—hyacinth is bringing human beings a disaster, we are among the first to develop hyacinth related products to picture an environment-friendly home.

We live in a house of hyacinth-powder-made light-weight walls, ceilings and doors, use disposable lunchboxes and cups made up of hyacinth powder and degradable plastics, drink mixed juice of specially cultivated hyacinth from Fujian Province and other vegetables, barbecue with hyacinth charcoals, sit on wooden furniture weaved by hyacinth stem fibre and appreciate the purple blossom of hyacinth in a vase, which again, weaved from the plant.

Posted by [Jianda Hu](#) on 01/13 at 01:05 AM

Jianda, it's great to read your comment and see all the uses this plant has in your home. Do you have any photos you could share? I am sure Julie would enjoy seeing them here!

Posted by [Kimberley](#) on 02/05 at 12:01 AM

Very interesting, are there any side effects from cattle eating hyacinth as they do absorb heavy metals from the water. Is there any information on long term use effects? Do the heavy metals stay behind in the cattle's cells for Humans to ingest and what are those side effects?

Posted by [Debbie](#) on 03/26 at 06:29 AM

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