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Scientists: Suez Canal project 'ominous' news for the Mediterranean Sea

Central worry is foreign species invading from the Red Sea.

By Zafir Rinat | Oct. 6, 2014 | 10:21 AM

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A group of 18 scientists specializing in marine ecosystems have published a warning about the ecological consequences of the Egyptian government's plan to expand the Suez Canal by building a new, larger and deeper waterway parallel to the present one. The scientists last week called it "ominous news," saying the project "is sure to have a diverse range of effects, at local and regional scales, on both the biological diversity and the ecosystem goods and services of the Mediterranean Sea."

The new canal would double the number of ships passing through daily, said Mohab Mamish, chairman of the Suez Canal Authority. This would further expand the contacts between the Red Sea and Mediterranean. The Egyptian central bank said three weeks ago it had raised the necessary funds for the project, over \$8 billion. The Egyptian military will be responsible for carrying out the project.

The letter was published in the journal *Biological Invasions* last week in response to the Egyptian announcement, and was signed by 18 scientists from 12 countries, including Prof. Bella S. Galil from the National Institute of Oceanography, Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research in Haifa. The scientists chose this journal since their main worry is about the invasion of foreign species into the Mediterranean from the Red Sea via the canal.

"Of nearly 700 multicellular non-indigenous species currently recognized from the Mediterranean Sea, fully half were introduced through the Suez Canal since 1869. This is one of the most potent mechanisms and corridors for invasions by marine species known in the world. Further, molecular methods demonstrate high levels of gene flow between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean populations," states the letter.

The situation will most likely be exacerbated by the warming of the Mediterranean waters in coming decades as climate change escalates. The warmer water would give the invasive species from the Red Sea an ecological advantage as they are already better adapted to the hotter climate.

"Most of the non-indigenous species introduced via the Suez Canal have established thriving populations along the Levant, from Libya to Greece, and several spread in the Western Mediterranean. The individual and cumulative impact of these non-indigenous species adversely affect the conservation status of particular species and critical habitats, as well as the structure and function of ecosystems and the availability of natural resources. Some species are noxious, poisonous, or venomous and pose clear threats to human health," states the letter.

"While global trade and shipping are vital to society, the existing international agreements also recognize the urgent need for sustainable practices that minimize unwanted impacts and long-term consequences. It is not too late for the signatories to the 'Barcelona Convention' and the Convention on Biological Diversity to honor their obligations and urge a regionally supervised, far-reaching 'environmental impact assessment' (including innovative risk management options) that would curtail, if not prevent, an entirely new twenty-first century wave of invasions through a next-generation Suez Canal," wrote the scientists.

In the past, Galil proposed studying the use of mechanisms for Suez such as those in use by the Panama Canal, such as allocating a section of the canal at both the entrance and exit where there are doors that prevent the entry of various species – and which would be filled with very high salinity water that would kill off all the invasive species. In addition, a risk survey of the ecological implications must also be conducted, said Galil; which could then be used to determine what means are needed to help deal with the environmental consequences.

"Yet despite these well-meaning international conventions, and a century worth of scientific publications documenting the spread and impact of non-indigenous species introduced through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea – not to mention a vast literature that speaks to the staggering economic, cultural, and environmental impacts around the world – we are faced with a seeming fait accompli," write the scientists.