Are We Getting the Full Story?

Sometimes the media and the popular press present stories that have more purpose of story telling- to grab interest than actually giving facts about the real situations. Instead they like to dress it up and the truths get hidden amongst the bouquet of adjectives that tell a fancy story. Understandably, there are many reasons behind this; for example, they need to cater to an audience of many ages, many educational backgrounds, and many interests. As a result of this, the stories are given in a basic format so that all can equally appreciate the information. This means that most of the time, there is little use of scientific words and terms, because naturally, no one is interested in reading an article in which they can’t pronounce the words. Consequently, some important information may be lost in the translation. However, not all popular press stories are like this; a good editor can make sense of a truly scientific piece and transform it into something that still provides facts while not leaving out imperative details.

Although, not all would agree, insects are very interesting little creatures and they make up a big chunk of all the known species in the world. Some are very important in society while others are more pests and although not always visible, they are always around in all environments interacting with humans. The insects discussed in this paper however, are not very advantageous to us and are considered pests in many communities worldwide.

The paper, titled “Hidden, hungry invader threatens city of Mardi Gras,” tells the story of Formosan termites and how they have destroyed the city of New Orleans. The story is very accurate as far as what it presents to the public as compared with scientific literature and yet it is still simple and an enjoyable read. This paper will compare the popular press news story with the actual science behind what is presented.
It is believed that these termites, the Formosan termites, were introduced into New Orleans and other coastal areas after World War II and have been thriving and multiplying ever since. (LSU) In many papers it is agreed upon that these invaders jumped aboard ships that were headed here from Asia. And so, for the last thirty years they have been and still are building many colonies, each of several million termites (Scheffrahn). Because of the large colony size, they are almost impossible to completely destroy. The story about how they got here and what we are doing about it is all simplified and incorporated into the news article very creatively.

These Formosan termites are often referred to as “super-termites”, as stated in the news article and confirmed in many other sources. One source explains that they are given this name because they are “one of the most destructive termite species in the world today,” they have large colonies, the territory of a single colony can be up to 300 feet long, they infest a wide variety of structures, and they can destroy wood at a very rapid rate (? [Please see note] ).

The news article also suggests an environment in which the termites thrive: “in the warm, thick springtime air, millions of termites begin their annual mating season…” (Schulder). This is paralleled with information from Nan-Yao Su, who says that “[d]ispersal flights or “swarms” are massive and begin at dusk on calm and humid evenings from April to July” (Scheffrahn).

Although the article suggests that termites destroy wood, it doesn’t explain much more. Termites attack “structural lumbers and living plants because they are sources of cellulose,” and they also chew through other non-cellulose materials in search for food and a moist environment (Scheffrahn). So this means that termites can be found everywhere in search for their preferred environment.

As stated in the article, in trying to destroy or at least reduce these pests and their horrific effects on structures, baiting systems have been introduced. Traditionally, pesticides were used
and sprayed randomly in hopes of killing them; however, this proved unsuccessful. Pesticides are biohazards because they are toxic to more than just the termites. A more efficient way to reduce numbers and ultimately eliminate them is using baits. There is much information available regarding baiting termites and there are many different chemicals being tested, and the information is very accurate with what is presented by Schulder. The news article discusses that Su set out soft-wood blocks of wood to attract the termites and once they found it, he then set out wood that was laced with slow-acting chemicals (Schulder). The importance of the slow-acting chemical was that it would kill the termites right away; it allowed time for the termite to share it with the rest of the colony so that eventually the whole colony is affected and they are substantially reduced (?)

Overall, this paper was very well written; it was an enjoyable read which wasn’t bombarded with long, un-pronounceable words, yet it got the message across and presented a story that was valid. In terms of improvement, it needs little, if any. The author, Michael Schulder, gave a very good summary of the actual information that was presented in the scientific papers. However, additional information that I came across that was not included in the story, that although interesting was probably not required, were things like: this specific species build nests made from soil, chewed wood, plant matter, their own saliva and feces (?). There was also much information available about the colonies and how their hierarchy is arranged and that they shed their wings after brief flight (Scheffrahn). Some articles gave descriptions on how to identify them and other places that they are frequently found in which to avoid. So although, it was not needed to support the article, descriptive information about their appearance could have been incorporated for future reference for those who aren’t sure what they are.
Most of the information that was available was on the different chemicals that are being tested to determine which baits are the most effective and less harmful to others. There is much research devoted to the management of this very destructive species. Things such as preventative practices, soil treatments, and population control using bait are all described (Scheffrahn).

Formosan termites are such a problem in New Orleans that there is an organization just to work on preventing and controlling the species from more damage; it is known as “Operation Full Stop” (Spillman).

Along with research on how to control these pests, there is a need for research on their behaviours, and other preferred situations. Such research requires more than just observations and as pointed out “molecular genetic techniques have made it possible to determine relatedness between colonies and to investigate the influence of genetics on aggression” (Bland). Other papers that were found described research on factors affecting behaviors such as survival, tunneling, and feeding and the effects of different sized termites. Although these papers are interesting and explain much about the termites, they are not significant enough to have been summarized in the news article in order to get the story across.

As a result, I feel that the article was well written and covered the facts that needed to be addressed in order to make a sound story. So, even though there is much more information regarding research into the Formosan termites, adequate information was provided in the article for general knowledge and awareness of the topic. This paper provides a valid and adequate story regarding the termite problem in New Orleans.
References


(?) http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/BODY_MG064

**** Please note that I had gotten information from this website, but when I went back to get the information to reference it, it wasn’t available(?) I will try to find this information and send it to you as soon as I get it. I’m so sorry for this.
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Entomological accuracy in the popular press

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