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The Munch Bunch works to combat invasive species

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From two goats to 200! The Munch Bunch is a goat service company specializing in the removal of invasive species by allowing the goats to munch on plants.

From two goats to 200 and a welcoming sense of humor, husband and wife Dan and Allysse created The Munch Bunch to tackle invasive species. The Munch Bunch is a goat service company specializing in removing invasive species by allowing the goats to munch on the plants. “We’re from, I wish we were from Marine on St. Croix that would be lovely, anyone selling? No, we’re from

St. Croix Falls. We actually moved to St. Croix Falls to start the goat farm. Within a 48-hour period, we bought two goats, a trailer, a truck and a farm. We were going to town. The two goats, we turned into over 200, not by themselves though, we worked on that with them,” owner Allysse said.

The Munch Bunch and the Washington Conservation District held a joint workshop May 3 at Big Marine Park Reserve. Fifty percent of The Munch Bunch’s work is on residential property, and 50 percent is on public lands. Primarily, they work for smaller cities, and projects are predominantly Buckthorn focus, with some Garlic Mustard projects. The workshop was part marketing for The Munch Bunch, education about goats and invasive species, and a chance to gawk at goats.

Buckthorn and Garlic Mustard are two invasive species common in Minnesota that the goats can help with. Buckthorn first brought to North America from Europe as hedging material, can form dense underbrush. It crowds out native plants, specifically native shrubs and trees.



Buckthorn can be found in a few different forms, either as narrow and tall trees or more fern-like plants with narrow leaves. Garlic Mustard is originally from Europe and Asia and was initially brought to North America for herbal qualities and erosion control. Its leaves have a garlic smell when crushed. Garlic Mustard is a smaller, round plant that remains ground-level, with small white flowers in the spring.

Dan MacSwain, the Natural Resource Coordinator for the Washington County parks, was at the workshop and talked about how goats are used at Cottage Grove Ravine Regional Park and Lake Elmo Park to remove Buckthorn and Garlic Mustard. He said, “Garlic Mustard is one of the species we’ve had a lot of success with when it comes to Garlic Mustard grazing. We have used it upwards of I think we’re in year four. We’re going onto year four, so three to four years, and in that timeframe, when we’re grazing, it’s between May 1 and July 1. We’ve seen some incredible success at

reducing Garlic Mustard populations, especially in areas where maybe you recently removed the Buckthorn, and then what you have left come up is Garlic Mustard which is like carpet. So we've taken areas that are thick carpets and then turned it into where you can actually see natural woodland ground cover coming in."

While the goal is to remove the invasive species, the talk of the night was, of course, the goats, which are most successful at removing Buckthorn when the plants are two inches to five feet tall. Sprouts that are smaller than two inches, goats won't touch. Goats can tackle taller trees in the winter, where the goats will eat the bark and slowly kill the trees. Buckthorn dies through munching by the goats eating its leaves, which pulls the root energy up. While one grazing usually isn't enough to remove a Buckthorn population, twice a year munching for two to three years will cause the plants to die during the winter months since the plants waste so much energy regrowing leaves. Goats, however, do eat everything in sight, and they aren't very selective when



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it comes to what plants they do and do not eat. Allysse said, "You have to think about the goats as an antibiotic. You have to take the antibiotic to get better, and it might kill some of the good stuff inside of you. But once that bad stuff is gone, that good stuff is going to come again."

One fact about goats surprised the entire audience. Allysse asked the group, "What is the predator that I am most afraid of?" People yelled out their guesses: dogs, coyotes, mountain lions, teenage boys. The answer? Owls. Allysse said, "I am terrified of owls. They won't pick up a big one but will they will go for babies for sure."

As the group moved toward the goats, everyone was fascinated by the goats themselves.

They're cute. The audience began taking pictures of the goats frolicking through the small wooded area in the park. Goats are the selling point of the workshop, but the groundbreaking information came with new technology. Allysse pulled out her phone and showed us a map of where the goats were confined to. Usually, an electric fence is needed for the goats to remain in a specific location. The shock tells the goats where exactly the boundary is. Fencing is the bulk of the required labor before goats can be used in an area. The Munch Bunch recently received a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to study the effectiveness of virtual fencing. The goats wear a collar, similar to a dog collar used for an electric fence. The collar has small solar panels that keep the collar working for two to three months. The collar makes a noise to inform the goats where the boundary is, and they receive a shock if they reach outside of the GPS designated area. The Munch Bunch averages 0.4-2 shocks a day and said it takes about 48 hours for the goats to become accustomed to the system. One of the best parts of virtual fencing, as Allysse explained, is that there is constant GPS tracking of the goats, so if they do escape the virtual area, they can be tracked down. It'll also alert if a goat isn't moving or isn't moving as much as the other goats, allowing The Munch Bunch to determine if a goat is sick quickly.

Goats can be a handy tool for removing invasive species, but they also attract a crowd in a public park. If you are interested in using goats on your property, visit HireGoats.com to determine what company will service your area.

Elizabeth Trevathan is a high school student journalist and an intern with Angie Hong at the Washington Conservation District. Trevathan has been working with Hong to attend and write articles on the events and presentations that the organization leads. She attended a workshop led by the Washington Conservation District and The Munch Bunch, about the use of goats for invasive species removal and new goat technology.



