

How a forgotten environmental mascot reveals American anxieties surrounding race, gender, and immigration

August 5 2024



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Eighty years after his inception, Smokey the Bear continues to evoke the importance of wildfire prevention in the United States. However,

another environmental mascot was introduced around the same time whose history has now been all but forgotten.

Pestina, designed in 1958, took the form of a bug dressed not only as a human woman, but a "curvaceous, exotic" one, and was originally intended to represent to travelers the dangers of transporting [invasive species](#) and quarantined materials.

Over time, her persona became that of a "law-abiding friend," and finally, in the 1970s, her usage was phased out altogether.

["A Coquettish, Hitchhiking Bug': the Rise and Fall of Pestina, Symbol of Invasive Pests and Agricultural Quarantine,"](#) a new gallery essay in *Environmental History*, demonstrates how, despite its brevity, the life of Pestina reflected shifting American attitudes towards women, migration, and foreignness, as well as the changing habits of American consumers during the postwar economic boom.

"As [international trade](#) and travel accelerated after World War II," writes article author Erinn E. Campbell, the USDA struggled to monitor unprecedented numbers of pests and diseases moving across the globe.

In 1958, a federal inspector in Hawai'i devised a method of public outreach: a notice to hotel guests featuring a voluptuous bug wearing the clothes of a hula dancer. After the success of this advisory, the character was repurposed in Puerto Rico, this time "in Latin American dress."

From its inception, Campbell writes, the character of Pestina, incarnating mainland U.S. fears of external contamination, "illustrates how rhetoric of more-than-human 'invasiveness' can become entangled with entirely human prejudices."

A short while later, her character would be deracialized, but hardly

desexed. Clad in a little black dress and a pearl necklace, Pestina in the mid-1960s, writes Campbell, "now tapped into broader anxieties about 'vagrants,' sex workers, and other itinerant social outsiders."

In 1969, however, the USDA sanitized Pestina's public image. New standards "insisted that she must be portrayed 'always as a beneficial character' who encouraged travelers to obey regulations," her new slogan "Pestina says, help stop the spread of plant pests."

The USDA's reasons for rebranding Pestina are unclear, writes Campbell, and the mascot fell out of use a short while later. Nevertheless, her story provides fascinating insight into "how officials tried to convince an increasingly mobile public of the dangers of pest invasion," and into the ways in which this public defined itself in the mid-20th century through certain fears and fetishes regarding the greater world.

More information: Erinn E. Campbell, "A Coquettish, Hitchhiking Bug": The Rise and Fall of Pestina, Symbol of Invasive Pests and Agricultural Quarantine, *Environmental History* (2024). [DOI: 10.1086/730527](https://doi.org/10.1086/730527)

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: How a forgotten environmental mascot reveals American anxieties surrounding race, gender, and immigration (2024, August 5) retrieved 5 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-forgotten-environmental-mascot-reveals-american.html>

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