

THE OUTDOORS PAGE



BLADE PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Clockwise from top left: Burmese Python, Nile Monitor, Sailfin Catfish, Cuban Tree Frog, Giant African Snail, Green Iguana, Common Myna Bird, and African Jewelfish. (Species images are not to scale.)

Florida's other immigration problem

By MATT MARKEY and JEFF BASTING

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK — This is a place like no other — a nearly 2,400-square-mile subtropical wilderness area on the southern tip of the Florida peninsula — Everglades National Park. It is essentially a slow moving river of grass, fed by Lake Okeechobee to the north as it flows southwest to Florida Bay.

Just a few miles from the crush of humanity that is greater Miami, the Everglades is home to more than 350 species of birds, nearly that many species of fish — both freshwater and saltwater varieties — close to 50 types of reptiles and 40 species of mammals.

Increasingly, it is also home to a crush of invaders that have wreaked havoc throughout southern Florida. They don't belong here, and they present a menacing risk to the park's native inhabitants and to the three dozen species living here that are either threatened or endangered.

"The invasive species are a very big problem here, and one that we really don't have a good idea how to manage," said Kirk Singer, a park ranger who leads tours in an area of the Everglades where a manmade boardwalk passes by groups of alligators sunning themselves on a cool January morning.

Through the reckless disposal of exotic pets such as snakes, iguanas, monitors, and aquarium fish, the Everglades now has established populations of those unwanted aliens. Many others who belong on another continent are running, flying, or swimming nearby, further threatening the park's sensitive balance.

"For whatever reason, the park has become a dumping ground," said Linda Friar, the information officer for the Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks.

The biologists who monitor the Everglades estimate that non-native species now compose nearly a quarter of the plant and animal life in the region. What makes the Everglades so unique also makes it so inviting to the exotics.

"You release a pet snake in Ohio or Montana, and it's dead in no time, due to the

cold, traffic, or just the surroundings," Mr. Singer said. "Unfortunately, you release a snake near the Everglades and it can slip in the park and thrive. This place has the ideal climate and habitat for a lot of things that don't belong here."

Although some biologists theorize that the invasive plants could ultimately prove to be a larger problem here because of the way they can proliferate and drastically alter the habitat, the big snakes remain the poster child of the invasives.

Burmese pythons, one of the largest snakes on the planet, have established breeding populations in the Everglades. In 2000, biologists removed two Burmese pythons from in and around the park; since then, they have removed more than 1,800.

"We don't know if there's 5,000 of them out there, or 100,000," Mr. Singer said. "We just know there's a lot of them, and they are growing and multiplying."

In late October, officials captured and killed a 16-foot-long python that had just consumed an adult deer. There are also several documented cases of large pythons engaging in epic battles with alligators inside the park.

Earlier this month, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would ban the importation of four species of huge constrictor snakes — Burmese pythons, yellow anacondas, and the northern and southern African pythons — that are the scourge of the Everglades. That helps, Ms. Friar said, but it does not solve the problem.

"Nobody is talking about removing all of these invasive species from the Everglades — the place is just too vast and too remote," she said. "We can only hope to control what's already here, and stop the careless release of pets. 'Don't Let It Loose' is our campaign to educate the public to be more responsible with their pets."

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Released exotic pets upset the balance of the Florida Everglades



Some of the major invasive species



Nile Monitor: This carnivore from Africa can grow up to 9 feet long, and is an excellent swimmer, climber, and fast runner on land.



Green Iguanas: These aggressive herbivores can grow up to 5 feet long and weigh 20 pounds.



Burmese Python: One of the six largest snakes in the world. They average 12 feet in length but may grow up to 19 feet.



Cuban Tree Frog: Has a voracious appetite for native amphibians. Females may be over 6 inches long but most are 1-4 inches long.



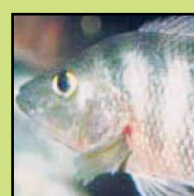
Sailfin Catfish: Grows to more than 20 inches long and weighs about 3 pounds. Adapts to many areas and damages shorelines with their burrows.



African Jewelfish: These fish feed on native fish and compete with them for prey and nesting sites.



Giant African land snail: These 10 inches-long snails eat everything in their path and can transmit meningitis.



Mayan Cichlid: Very adaptable fish that consume many of the prey preferred by native species. They are a foot long and weigh over a pound.



Common Myna Bird: A very aggressive exotic in the starling family and carries bird malaria.



Asian Swamp Eel: From India, Burma, and China, these eels all mature as females, then some become males. They can grow to nearly 34 inches long.

Photos courtesy of U.S.G.S. and www.evergladescisma.org