

*Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges Complex***Integrated Pest Management Plan***Frequently Asked Questions*

In keeping with its mission to conserve, protect, and enhance native fish and wildlife and the habitats they depend upon, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will actively control and remove certain invasive and exotic animals from public lands in the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges Complex. The Service is responsible for preventing the introduction of these species, detecting and eradicating or controlling their populations, and restoring populations of native wildlife and their habitats on National Wildlife Refuges. The strategies and justification for taking these actions are detailed in an Integrated Pest Management Plan.

*Key Largo woodrat/USFWS*

approach that is a cure-all for addressing the problem. The Plan is therefore both proactive in addressing the cause of the problem (i.e. people abandoning cats and other exotic species in natural areas) through public education and enforcement, as well as deliberate in addressing the consequences of the problem (i.e. non-native animals killing and competing with native wildlife) through trapping and removing certain animals from Refuge lands.

Q: Why is the Service moving ahead with predator management now?

The critically endangered status of the Lower Keys marsh rabbit and the Key Largo woodrat and other imperiled species demands urgent and immediate action. The removal of animals of common or exotic species to protect an endangered species or its habitat is often essential for wildlife conservation, especially in human-altered environments.

The need for reducing mortality of federally listed species from predation by cats has been well documented and included in several species recovery plans as actions to help increase species' survival. The Plan for controlling cats was developed based on extensive discussion and public input during several facilitated public meetings with a variety of stakeholders since 2008 (see <http://consensus.fsu.edu/lkmr/index.html>). Strategies for controlling other exotic animals are consistent with standard protocols adopted by local, state and federal agencies involved in exotic species management throughout Florida and the United States.

Q: Why are cats an issue for wildlife?

Cats have contributed to the decline and even the extinction of many species of birds and many small mammals around the world, mostly on islands.

Scientists estimate that every year in the United States free-roaming cats kill hundreds of millions of native birds and small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles, including species of conservation concern and more common species.

*Marsh rabbit/USFWS*

Cats are recognized as a widespread and serious threat to the integrity of native wildlife populations and natural ecosystems. Although many free-roaming cats appear healthy or happy at a given point in time, they typically have hard lives and high death rates that result in reduced longevity. Their run-ins with wildlife include competition, predation, and disease transmission.

Q: Why can't cats and other exotic species roam freely on the refuge like other wild animals?

The fundamental mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is wildlife conservation.

**Q: What is an Integrated Pest Management Plan?**

The Integrated Pest Management Plan includes a variety of methods for managing several invasive and exotic animal species. The primary invasive and exotic animal species of concern are feral and free-roaming cats, as well as non-native opossums, armadillos, rats, snakes and lizards that prey on or compete with several threatened and endangered species on four National Wildlife Refuges in the Florida Keys. The Plan also includes strategies to control local populations of native raccoons that may be artificially subsidized by human food and garbage.

The Plan includes an extensive review of legal authorities, scientific literature, and other sources. There is no single

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Refuges provide important habitat for native plants and many species of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and other invertebrates. Various federal laws and policies state that each Refuge will be managed to fulfill its original purpose(s) as well as the Service's mission, and we strive to accomplish this by ensuring that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of each Refuge are maintained, and where appropriate, restored. Cats and other exotic species do not belong on a National Wildlife Refuge or other natural areas that support native populations of wildlife.

Responsible pet owners should keep their cats indoors or in the yard. Pets should never be allowed to roam freely.

Q: What is a feral cat?

Feral cats are free-roaming cats that are born to stray cats or other feral cats, and they feed on wildlife or on food left out by strangers. Since feral cats never lived with or interacted with people, it may be very difficult for them to be adopted into a home.

Free-roaming cats also may be stray cats that were either indoor or outdoor cats at one point but have been abandoned by their owners. They feed on either wildlife or food left out by strangers. Depending on how long they have been homeless, they may or may not feel comfortable around people and often kill wildlife out of instinct.

Q: Can feral or free-roaming cats transmit diseases?

A: Yes. They can serve as carriers of infectious diseases and are able to transmit those diseases to other animals and humans. The following diseases have been documented in cats in Florida: Rabies*, Feline Leukemia Virus, Feline Distemper, Feline Infectious Peritonitis, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, Feline Viral Upper Respiratory Disease, Cat-scratch Disease*, Toxoplasmosis*, Lyme Disease*, Roundworms*, Hookworms*, Plague* (*transmissible to humans). Visit the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's website for more information at www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/cats.htm.

Q: What will you do with animals caught in traps?

Cats caught in the Service's trapping program on Refuge lands will be transferred to a Monroe County animal control shelter. The county animal control shelter has the authority and professional expertise to decide the best options for the cats, which include returning to its



Boa constrictor found on No Name Key/USFWS

owner, seeking a new adoptive family, fostering, relocating to a long-term cat care facility, or euthanizing.

Other non-native animals such as opossums, armadillos, snakes and lizards caught by the Service will be humanely dispatched. Native raccoons and all other native wildlife that are accidentally caught in traps will be released alive from traps.

Q: What happens if my cat is caught in a trap?

The best way to avoid having your cat caught in the Service's trapping program on Refuge lands is to keep your cat indoors. For more information about how to keep your cat happy and healthy indoors, visit the Cats Indoors website at <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/index.html>. If you live near the Refuge and choose to allow your cat to roam freely beyond your private property, make sure the cat has a collar, tattoo, and/or microchip that identify you as the cat's owner so it can be returned. If your cat goes missing, check with the county animal control shelter to locate and reclaim your cat.

Q: What is TNR and why isn't it an option here?

A trap-neuter-release program typically involves un-owned cats that are trapped, sterilized, vaccinated, and then released back into the environment. Volunteer caretakers may or may not provide regular food and water to these homeless animals. Often, such cat colonies continue to grow because they may serve as dumping grounds for unwanted cats, and

the food and water attracts more cats and wildlife such as raccoons and Key deer. TNR is not an option because it is illegal to feed wildlife or allow domestic animals to roam freely on National Wildlife Refuges. Additionally, even if a TNR program successfully maintained a stable number of cats, they are still likely to kill or injure native wildlife.

Q: Can I call the Service if I need to have a stray cat, nuisance raccoon or green iguana removed from my yard?

No. The Monroe County animal control provider is responsible for assisting residents with nuisance or stray animals on private property.

Q: Who do I call if I see a large exotic snake in my neighborhood?

Everyone is encouraged to call 1-888-I've Got 1 (1-888-483-4681), a 24/7 hotline that triggers immediate action by trained responders. The only way for us to prevent the spread of these exotic reptiles is through early detection and rapid response, and your assistance in reporting these sightings immediately is greatly appreciated. Download a free identification guide at www.evergladescisma.org/AnimalIDDeckLoRes.pdf.

Q: How do I get a copy of the Integrated Pest Management Plan?

Send an e-mail to keydeer@fws.gov or call 305/872 0774 asking to be added to our e-mail distribution list so you can automatically receive an electronic copy of the Final Integrated Pest Management Plan. We can mail a hard copy upon request.