

NEWS RELEASE

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CAPTIVE-BRED KEY LARGO WOODRATS **REINTRODUCED TO NATIVE HABITAT**

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- For the first time, Key Largo woodrats born in captivity were released into their native habitat at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) last week with the first seven of a planned 14. The rest are scheduled to be taken to the refuge Feb. 22.

As of today, the seven woodrats taken to Crocodile Lake NWR are all doing well. They're working hard on their nests, with most them making use of as much native vegetation as they're given.

The Key Largo woodrat historically inhabited tropical hardwood hammock forests throughout Key Largo south to Tavernier. This small mammal was listed as federally endangered in 1984 due to habitat modification and development pressure. Since then, additional threats have emerged, including increased predation pressure from non-native animals such as free-roaming cats and Burmese pythons. After a severe population decline was detected by researchers--estimating less than 90 individuals remained--the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) initiated a captive breeding program in 2002 at Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo and in 2005 at Disney's Animal Kingdom near Orlando.

"As a primary center for Florida wildlife conservation, Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo was pleased to respond to the call from the Service in 2002 to receive the first group of wild woodrats in support of a captive breeding initiative for these endangered native animals," said Dr. David Murphy, zoo veterinarian. "This conservation initiative was successful in the protection and propagation of nearly two dozen pups at the zoo. Together with Disney's Animal Kingdom, we have successfully managed and expanded the captive population. Conservation starts at home, and it's an exciting time to see this program come full circle with the release of captive born woodrats into their native habitat."

Breeding Key Largo woodrats was a challenge since little was known about the social structure, reproductive biology or ecology of this elusive nocturnal species. Key Largo wood rats are atypical for rodents. They are asocial and females appear to tolerate the presence of males only for breeding. When breeding is successful, females typically produce only two litters per year of one to three pups per litter.

"Through diligent research, we've built a successful captive breeding program in a short period of time and have learned significantly more about Key Largo wood rat reproductive behavior, maternal care and pup development. As a researcher, it's very rewarding to be able to contribute to the recovery of an endangered species," said Christy Alligood, Ph.D., research specialist at Disney's Animal Kingdom.

This collaboration to augment the existing wild population, now found only in Key Largo, may prove even more important in the future as this species will be among the first to exhibit impacts from sea level rise.

"Thanks to Disney's Animal Kingdom and Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, we have the capability to breed Key Largo wood rats in a captive setting. We're now taking the next step and placing these woodrats back into their native habitat. We're hopeful these efforts will help improve the condition of this highly endangered species," said Paul Souza, Field Supervisor at the Service's South Florida Office in Vero Beach.

Upon arrival at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge, the Key Largo wood rats are placed in individual enclosures with nest structures designed and built by refuge volunteers. Each animal will be fed for about seven days until the enclosures are removed. "We're excited about reintroducing Key Largo wood rats here. This species is benefitting from a partnership of passionate people," said Steve Klett, Refuge Manager at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

"We expect them to cache food in the nest structures, which will hold them over as they learn to find native foods. Their caches will help in the short-term, but eventually making a full transition to native leaves, fruits and seeds will be a critical step," said Sandra Sneckenberger, biologist at the Service's South Florida Office.

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