

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## EASTERN INDIGO SNAKE LISTED AS THREATENED

The eastern indigo snake--a favorite with snake collectors throughout the United States--has been listed as a threatened species by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Associate Director Keith M. Schreiner announced today.

The final rulemaking adding the snake to the U.S. List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife was published in the January 31, 1978, Federal Register.

The species is now found only in Florida and Georgia. Its range once included Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina, but there have been no confirmed sightings of the snake in these States since the 1950's.

Commercial trade by pet dealers is probably the main cause for the decline of this species. Eastern indigo snakes are extremely docile, colorful, and grow as long as 8 feet, making them highly desirable as pets to snake fanciers. Prime specimens sell for as much as \$250 in the Northeast.

Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi have strict laws to protect the eastern indigo snake, but the States cannot effectively control trade once the snakes have been taken out of State. Collectors often claim that the snakes in trade came from Alabama or South Carolina, which do not have laws to protect the species. Although eastern indigo snakes have not been reported in these States for years, the claim is difficult to disprove and trade in illegally taken snakes continues. The "threatened" listing protects eastern indigo snakes from commercial exploitation in all five States.

The species is also threatened by the modification and destruction of its habitat. It inhabits a region that is experiencing rapid development and often lives in areas with well drained soils that are ideal for human settlement. The result has been a considerable loss of habitat, causing a serious decline in the populations of eastern indigo snakes in many areas.

In addition to overcollecting and habitat destruction, the eastern indigo snake may have declined because of the practice of gassing gopher tortoise burrows. This technique is used to drive out rattlesnakes that use the tortoise burrows as a refuge. Indigo snakes also use gopher tortoise burrows, and recent research indicates that eastern indigo snakes are often harmed or killed by this practice.

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