UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW (Time 4:57)

KEY LARGO WOODRAT (HOST SARAH LEON WITH SANDRA SNECKENBERGER)

P R O C E E D I N G S
(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I'm on the phone today with Sandra Sneckenberger, Fish and Wildlife Biologist at the South Florida Field Office. Hi, Sandra, how are you today?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: Good, Sarah, how are you?

MS. LEON: I'm doing fine, thanks. Do you have some time to talk to us about the Key Largo woodrats?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: Sure.

MS. LEON: Great. Can you start by telling us a little about this species?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: Well, the woodrat is a medium-size rodent. It's a little bit larger than a chipmunk, but smaller than a rabbit and it's fur is brown and cinnamon colored, except for its under side which is white or cream colored. And it occurred throughout the length of Key Largo down South nearly to the town of Caveneer (phonetic), but they're not limited just to the northern part of Key Largo.

MS. LEON: All right. And I understand that Key Largo woodrat population may have declined by as much as 97 percent since 1986. And this is obviously a huge decline so what happened?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: We don't really know what happened, nor do we know the severity of the decline. With an animal that is so difficult to detect like the woodrat, it's hard to identify true trends in the population.

We have different biologists using different survey methods and it's hard to figure if the population estimates are comparable from year to year and usually they're not and that's something we're working on right now is working with researchers to find the best methods that we would use year after year.

But that said, even if the past estimates aren't comparable, the perceived trend was so severe like you said and was also accompanied by fewer sightings of sickness of constricted distribution, so although we'll never really know what caused the decline, it's probably a bunch of factors. But in 1980 there was a lot of habitat loss and fragmentation in Key Largo and obviously that can have serious impacts.

MS. LEON: All right. Sandra, so what recovery actions are currently underway?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: We're working with researchers and statisticians to develop long-term monitoring methods, will help us identify population trends and focus our recovery tasks. And because the Key Largo woodrat population is so small, and the range is limited and fragmented, we're working with geneticists to identify barriers and develop strategies to alleviate issues related to population isolation.

And one big thing that we have going on is starting with six pairs of woodrats from the wild in 2002, we now have 38 Key Largo woodrats in captivity at two zoos. And we've learned a lot from having a captive colony and we hope to complete our first release of captive animals back to the Key Largo forest early next year.

And we're also protecting woodrats from the Burmese Python which has been present in Key Largo since at least 2007 and has been documented to prey on the Key Largo woodrat and researchers are hard at work right now surveying for pythons on Key Largo and developing methods to limit the spread of snakes into the Keys from the mainland.

MS. LEON: All right. And I would imagine that working with this species in the wild would be particularly challenging because they are nocturnal creatures and they do spend a considerable amount of time out of sight. But aside from this, Sandra, what are the major obstacles when working to recover this species? And how is the recovery team working to overcome them?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: Like you said, detectability is probably the largest problem, the biggest challenge we have. There's also just the view of protecting a rat a lot of people have. You know, a different idea of what a rat is based on the exotic rats that carry diseases.

We also have a lot of feral cats in the Keys that prey on the woodrat and disturb their feeding habits. Pythons and other non-native snakes that are coming into the area. Competitors, mostly non-native ones like the Gambian Pouch Rat which was introduced south of Key Largo in '99 unintentionally, hurricanes, disease, sea level

rise and also maintain the genetic diversity and reducing isolation, so a lot of work to be done.

MS. LEON: What might the future look like for the species given these challenges?

MS. SNECKENBERGER: Well, everyone working on the recovery of the Key Largo woodrat is extraordinarily dedicated but the future is still uncertain. They've not rebounded from the decline that started over 20 years ago. And there are additional serious threats to the species since then like the python.

And when populations fall to a low level it becomes harder and harder to bounce back, even when threats are minimized. So, there's a lot of work to be done and also sea level rise, the species will be among the first to feel the effects.

MS. LEON: All right. Thank you, Sandra, so much for your time today and giving us a little more information on the Key Largo woodrat and it looks like there is a lot more work to be done, but you and the recovery team are doing a great job so far. So, keep up the good work.

MS. SNECKENBERGER: Thanks, Sarah. My pleasure.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.

(Music plays, whereupon, the interview was concluded.)