

U.S. plans to remove nonnative species from Florida Keys

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Over the past century, as developers of the Florida Keys gobbled up pristine real estate, the federal government created four refuges along the island chain to protect wildlife and preserve habitat.

But at the safe havens for nature, not all creatures are welcome.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service wants to remove all nonnative predators. On Monday, after several heated public meetings with animal advocates, the federal agency will release a 44-page draft plan on how it recommends it should do so.

The compromise plan includes live trapping and some euthanization.

"It's a real controversial thing - some people believe every animal has a right to live," said Anne Morkill, manager of the [Florida Keys](#) National Wildlife Refuge Complex that encompasses the Key Deer, Key West, Great White Heron and Crocodile Lake preserves.

The refuges' unwanted are a hodgepodge of exotic and abandoned intruders: Virginia opossums, nine-banded armadillos, common boa constrictors, Burmese pythons, Gambian pouch rats, black rats, green iguanas, the Nile monitor, black spinytail iguanas, imported red fire ants, and, especially, free-roaming domestic cats.

Refuge biologists say these nonnative predators are messing up the natural ecosystem and "posing a grave danger" to the native species,

which include 30 protected by the Endangered Species Act and some found nowhere else in the world.

The native animals and birds of the island chain already have been dealing with a greatly reduced habitat due to development that came with Henry Flagler's railroad and a booming tourist trade.

"We don't want to further make it harder for all the critters to make their living by this uncontrolled experiment of nonnative species," National Key Deer Refuge biologist Chad Anderson said. "We're just trying to even the natural playing field." The management plan outlines three alternative courses of action. Doing nothing does not solve the problem. Killing all the predators is effective but not "socially" acceptable.

So refuge managers recommend the compromise alternative, which integrates education, live trapping of cats and some humane euthanizing of other predators that don't belong wild in the Keys.

The plan also calls for a study of native raccoons, which can wreak havoc on an ecosystem if populations get unnaturally inflated due primarily to feasting on residential garbage.

The public will have 30 days to review the draft and make comments. Any changes will be made in February, with the plan taking effect as early as March.

Many of the predators targeted for removal are abandoned pets dumped into the fragile ecosystem. The problem continues to perpetuate as these homeless animals breed.

"There's a misconception that it's a good thing to drop all animals off in the wild," Anderson said.

The nonnative species upset the natural food chain, which includes American bald eagles lunching on endangered Lower Keys marsh rabbits.

"The native species have been playing the back and forth game for thousands of years," Anderson said. "But all within the last 50 years, we've dumped in all these new species that don't have the system of checks and balances, down to the germs and viruses."

A formal predator plan was needed after periodic predator control in the refuges over the past decade did not work.

That has especially been the case for the National Key Deer Refuge, with its approximately 8,000 upland acres interspersed with residential neighborhoods and commercial areas, primarily on Big Pine Key.

"Our refuge map looks like a puzzle," Morkill said.

In 2007, the National Key Deer Refuge implemented a temporary trapping program of feral cats - primarily to save the endangered marsh rabbit that exists nowhere else in the world. It brought out the claws of both feline and raccoon lovers.

The traps attracted more raccoons than cats. At first the raccoons were released. But in a second round of trapping, refuge managers decided the accidental capture of raccoons was a good opportunity to euthanize some of them to lower what was believed to be an inflated population due to easy-access lunch: human's garbage.

Angry animal advocate groups protested. They included Forgotten Felines of the Florida Keys, Raccoon Rescue and Stand Up for Animals, then the county-contracted, no-kill animal shelter on Big Pine Key where the trapped cats were taken.

Even Playboy founder Hugh Hefner got into the act. The marsh rabbit's Latin name, *Sylvilagus palustris hefneri*, was named for him after he paid for its study decades earlier. Hefner donated \$5,000 to Stand Up for Animals to help both his namesake bunnies and the stray cats.

The refuge managers began putting together a formal plan. Four public meetings were held in 2008, using a professional mediator.

Jerry Dykhuisen, vice president of Forgotten Felines, described the early meetings as "very heated." But he gave the U.S. [Fish](#) & Wildlife Service "kudos for making a genuine effort to get everyone together."

There was common ground. Both sides admitted the problem was not created by the animals, but by humans. And both sides were committed to "no homeless cats."

A new group was formed, "One Animal Family," with a slogan "No Pet Left Behind."

Educational brochures will be printed to explain to people why it's important not to feed wildlife, keep outdoor garbage cans sealed tight, spay and neuter pets and not let pets roam free on or near refuge lands.

The biggest compromise came with the raccoons. Because they are indigenous to the Florida Keys, with two recognized subspecies, it was agreed the removal of them could yield unintended ecological consequences. The plan calls for more research and evaluation of those cute but pesky critters before determining an action plan.

While none of the predators directly affect the refuges' most well-known inhabitants, the diminutive Key Deer, Morkill said the plan's waste-management education will indirectly help them.

"Key Deer knock over garbage cans as much as raccoons," she said. "It's a source of disease transmission."

Many deer also die due to being chased by unleashed dogs, which force them into canals, where they drown, or out into the streets, where they are hit by cars.

For the cats, traps will be set at dusk and closed each morning, reducing exposure of trapped animals to adverse weather. Feral cat colonies and feeding stations on refuge lands will be removed. The cats will be taken to the local animal shelter.

Despite all the input from the public, Morkill knows the plan won't please everybody.

Mike Roberts, Monroe County's senior administrator of Environmental Resources, said that with any management plan in populated areas, there are usually equal numbers of proponents and opponents.

"That's particularly true on Big Pine," Roberts said. "A number of the public are very fond of their free-roaming cats."

The county has a big interest in the success of the program. Its future building permits in that area depend on the preservation of the native species left.

Dykhuisen of Forgotten Felines said he could live with the compromise plan until the no-kill shelter ended its contract with the county in August, after an audit showed questionable use of county funds. The temporary contract is with the Florida Keys Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which is not a no-kill facility.

"This is going to be a death sentence for some of the cats," Dykhuisen

said.

But he also understands that people created the refuge's predator problem. "One of the major enclaves of the refuge is No Name Key," he said. "People go out there and abandon their animals where nobody sees them do it. That's go to stop."

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