

# Floridians passionate about, but puzzled by, endangered and invasive species, survey finds

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(Phys.org) —Floridians would likely support a 1 percent sales tax bump to prevent and eradicate disruptive invasive species, a new University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences public opinion survey shows.

The survey also shows that residents say they're not as up to speed on endangered and [invasive species](#) as they would like to be.

An online survey in July of 515 Floridians found respondents believe environmental conservation is an important issue and ranked it sixth of 10 public-interest topics: well behind the economy and health care, but ahead of immigration and climate change.

For the second annual survey on endangered species, researchers from the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education, or PIE Center, included questions about invasive species, said Alexa Lamm, the center's associate director.

The last decade has seen the state struggle with a growing number of non-native species that can wildly disrupt the ecosystem, including the Burmese python, the Argentine black and white tegu lizard and lionfish from the Indo-Pacific.

Florida has 121 animal and plant species listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act, including Florida panthers, American crocodiles and aboriginal prickly-apples.

Jack Payne, UF's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources, said as someone whose research centered on wildlife and conservation, the issues are close to his heart.

"I'm thrilled that the people of Florida want to know more about the animals and plants in our state that are imperiled," Payne said. "That's what UF/IFAS Extension is for—educating the public on topics critical to the state's future."

In the survey, 55 percent of respondents said they would support a 1 percent increase in the state's [sales tax](#) rate to fund prevention and eradication efforts for invasive species. But their support only goes so far, with just 18 percent willing to support a 5 percent sales tax increase for the same purpose.

UF wildlife ecology and conservation professor Frank Mazzotti, one of the state's scientists on the front lines of the invasive species battle, said if Floridians were ever to approve better funding for his research team's work, he'd fight in this precise order: prevention, early detection and rapid response, containment, and long-term management.

Ecologists use a term called "the invasion curve" to illustrate why he'd choose that order. The more time a species has to become established and the larger an area it becomes established in, the more expensive control costs will be.

"Keeping them out in the first place is always your best bet," Mazzotti said. "It's time to stop playing Dutch boy and the dike."

To mount such a funding effort would take education, however. Fewer than 15 percent of the survey's respondents considered themselves highly or extremely knowledgeable about threats to [endangered species](#), how to prevent endangerment or even which species are currently endangered.

Sixty-two percent of the survey's respondents said they were either not knowledgeable or only slightly knowledgeable on the invasive species topic, with many suggesting they don't know what types of invasive species are living in Florida or what they can do to prevent invasive species from entering the state.

"It's interesting that this is one of the topics Floridians have the least amount of knowledge about, but the most passion for," said Lamm, an assistant professor of agricultural education and communication.

The PIE Center will host a free webinar on the endangered and invasive species topic at 2 p.m. Aug. 20. Register in advance at [www.piecenter.com/endangered](http://www.piecenter.com/endangered).

Lamm will moderate and Steve Johnson, an assistant professor in wildlife ecology and conservation, will offer insight.

Besides endangered and invasive species, PIE Center survey topics have included public perceptions about water quality and quantity, immigration, food safety, food security and genetically modified organisms.

Provided by University of Florida

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