

The new plan for destroying invasive pythons

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Male pythons surgically implanted with inch-long radio transmitters that are then tracked by plane every two weeks. The hope is the male will lead to a female.

Pythons have been breeding and eating their way through the Everglades for two decades with a haphazard strike force in pursuit—a multitude

tracking by plane, with dogs, on foot, carrying shotguns, laying traps and earning bounties.

Yet the invasive snake advances, erasing furry Florida natives from Everglades National Park, challenging the American alligator, and eyeing wading bird rookeries.

This month, a group of federal, state and nonprofit officials gathered in Fort Lauderdale to launch an "Interagency Python Management Plan."

It's hoped the blueprint for [python](#) control, which has been talked about since at least 2016, will increase agency coordination, share successes and expand mitigation to all of South Florida and its myriad landowners.

"I wish this had happened a long time ago, but it is finally taking place," said Art Roybal, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service senior biologist, who began his python fight more than a decade ago when a snake ate an endangered Key Largo woodrat. "We knew pythons were going to be an issue. I call them all-terrain eating machines."

Led by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the python management planning group will meet four times a year with the expectation that a plan will be drafted in a year or two.

While invasive lionfish, melaleuca and even a damaging climbing yam called the air potato have management plans, the python has so far escaped the extra scrutiny that outlines the species history, ecological and economic impacts, range, methods of control and how different agencies will work together.

Kathy Worley, director of science at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, said connecting land owners—private and public—is also key in trying to control the python spread.

"Pythons don't know boundaries and we can't either," Worley said. "Everyone has their little pieces of the pie. This plan will remove barriers and give us flexibility in management options too."

The conservancy surgically implants male pythons with inch-long radio transmitters that are then tracked by plane every two weeks. The hope is the male will lead to a female. When a male is found, researchers mark its position and go in.

"We use canoes, boats, we go over land, we hack our way in," Worley said. "We are after the female. We take out the males too, except for our transmitter guy."

Burmese pythons were first reported as established in Everglades National Park in 2000, according to research reported by the University of Florida.

Native to Asia, the Burmese python is considered one of the largest snakes in the world. FWC's website says it was likely introduced into the Everglades by accident or intentional releases by pet owners. While not venomous, "the giant constrictors have thrived, assuming a top position on the food web."

But it wasn't until March 2012 that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed them as an injurious species, prohibiting importation and shipment. Between 1996 and 2006 the USFWS estimates 99,000 Burmese python were imported to the U.S.

Today, there is no good estimate of how many pythons live wild in South Florida, but estimates are in the tens of thousands.

Gov. Ron DeSantis brought the python problem to the attention of the Trump administration when the president spoke March 29 at the Herbert

Hoover Dike.

DeSantis said during an announcement in West Palm Beach of his new chief science officer that he pulled the acting director of the US Department of Interior aside to stress that a lot of money is being spent to restore the Everglades, yet the snakes are "just wreaking havoc."

A 2011 study that looked at small mammal populations in Everglades National Park found declines of between 87 and 99% for raccoon, opossums, white-tailed deer and bobcats. The study, which included scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey, said no rabbits or foxes were seen in park surveys between 2003 and 2011.

"I worked in Everglades National Park in the 1990s and I would see marsh rabbits all the time. I have not seen one here in six years," said Tylan Dean, biological resources branch chief for the Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks.

Last year, trained FWC python killers were allowed into the park. It was a move the park fought for years because hunting is prohibited within its boundaries. Before hunters were allowed in, volunteers were used to track the snakes.

"We don't think our efforts to control the population are sufficient so we need to do more," Dean said. "It's still worth it. That's the point of the python management plan. It's still worth it to try and do better."

While radio tracking works for areas of southwest Florida where conservancy hunters push through tangles of mangroves, other areas benefit from hunters driving canal banks where snakes are known to warm themselves.

Mike Kimmel, a paid hunter with the South Florida Water Management

District's 2-year-old python control program, caught its 2000th snake in March after finding it on a levee.

Worley believes the best python mitigation method has yet to be invented—a chemical that mimics the pheromone produced by a female that can be used as bait to bring the snakes to the hunters.

"They just need to get the recipe right," Worley said. "At this point, I do not see us eradicating them, but we can control them if we work together."

The python management plan team's next meeting is Aug. 13-15 in Naples.

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