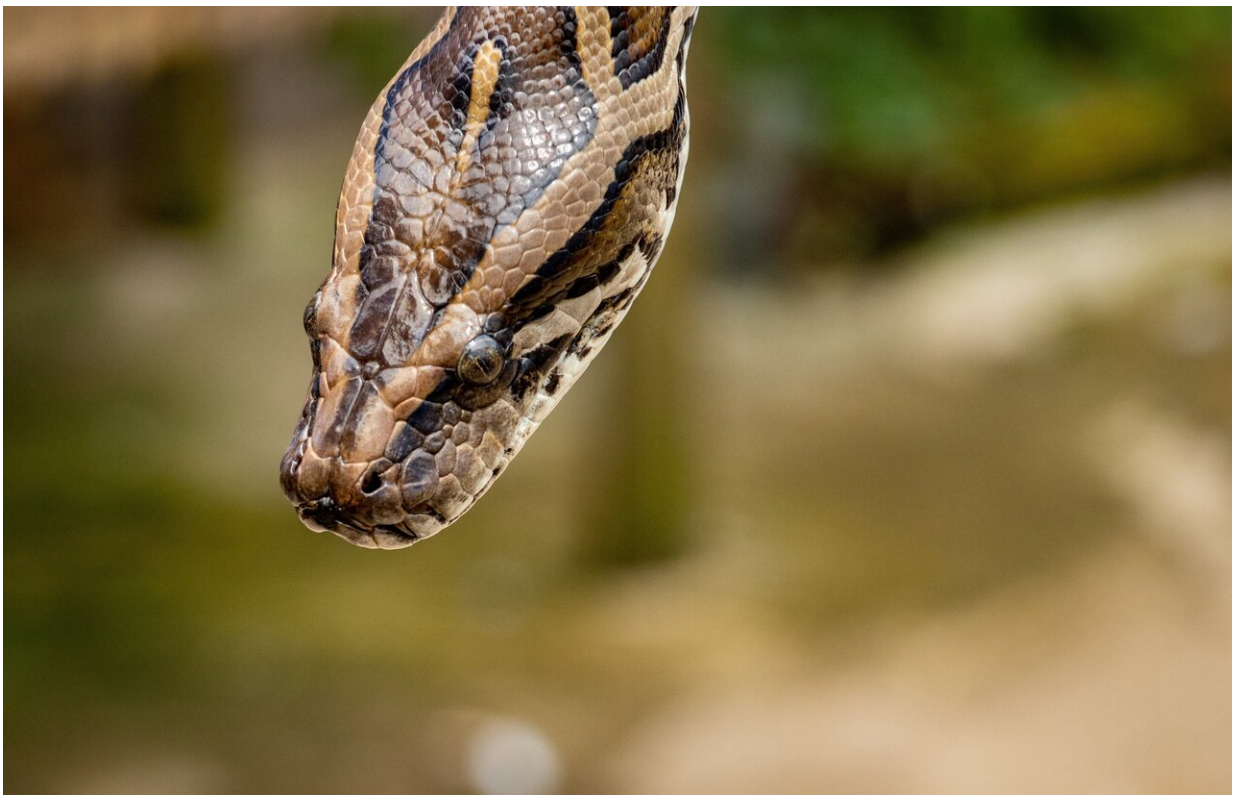


Florida wants to stop these reptiles from becoming the next invasive species in the Everglades

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Wildlife managers in Florida are finally moving to address an existential question: If the state is like an all-you-can eat buffet for invasive reptiles

originally introduced as exotic pets, then why are some of those species still imported and sold by breeders and pet stores?

Until 2010, the now infamous Burmese python was easily found at pet stores across Florida, even as scientific evidence showed they were partly behind a decline in [native species](#) in the Everglades. Wildlife managers took too long to act and now the snakes are here to stay, eating through the Everglades' dwindling supply of mammals and disrupting the balance of predator and prey.

Florida wildlife managers want that to change, and fast. They are proposing the strictest set of rules yet prohibiting in-state breeding and sale of tegus and other exotic reptiles considered high-risk with the goal of preventing an infestation. Importation also would be banned.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will vote this week on final rules that place on the prohibited species list all tegus and green iguanas, as well as other reptiles to protect the state's ecosystems. The meeting on Thursday and Friday will be open to public comments. The proposed legislation groups species like tegus and green iguanas into the same category as pythons and Nile monitor lizards, which cannot be sold as pets.

"We need to take a hard look at how we regulate the breeders and the exotic pet trade as a whole," said Rodney Barreto, FWC's newly elected chairman. "We are very concerned for the native animal population, especially considering the damage that pythons are doing."

If passed, the new rules will go into effect after 45-60 days, and after that [reptile](#) businesses and pet owners will have an additional 90 days to come into compliance with the new rules. The proposed language says that no one in Florida will be allowed to sell, own, breed or trade tegus and iguanas with a few exceptions such as people working with

education exhibitions, research or eradication and control activities. Wildlife managers are targeting the exotic pet trade because they say most invasive fish and wildlife in Florida were established through the escape or intentional release of captive animals.

Ecological and human threat

FWC says the exotic species pose a significant threat to Florida's ecology, economy and human health and safety, and that its current regulations are no longer effective in managing their expansion and damage. With more than \$10 million spent annually on invasive species, joint efforts by FWC and other state and federal agencies are nowhere near controlling some of the more widespread invaders.

The new proposed rules also state that having the listed reptiles as pets will be prohibited. No licenses are currently required for pet iguanas or tegus, so people who own those animals will be able to get a free permit to keep them through the end of the pet's life. But after that they won't be able to buy or adopt new ones. FWC will continue to allow pet owners to surrender their prohibited animals without penalty through a pet amnesty program. Breeders could still sell animals taken from the wild to out-of-state customers, including those they receive from licensed trappers.

Among the most controversial rule is the phasing out of commercial breeding of tegus and iguanas by June 2024. Reptile keepers wanted their businesses to be grandfathered in to continue to operate.

"We are only going to have until June 2024 to get rid of our family members," Carlos Michaelsen, owner of Tropical Reptiles and Exotics, said in a video viewed more than 25,000 times on Instagram. "These aren't just animals to us, these are family members."

Michaelson and his wife, Nancy, specialize in hybrids and so-called morphs, which are reptiles that have genetic mutations that make them look unique and are in very high demand. They are calling on reptile lovers to write to FWC to oppose the new regulation, arguing it fails to address the expansion of harmful invasive species "while punishing responsible citizens."

Everglades restoration advocates have been pushing for an end to the exotic reptile trade because of the risk such reptiles pose to billions of dollars' worth of restoration work—including programs to revive native species that were on the brink of extinction, like the Cape Sable seaside sparrow.

The python's impact on small native animals has been documented, and the state is spending over \$2 million every year to deal with them.

Iguanas can cause extensive damage and increase the costs of maintaining water management infrastructure, and the tegus may become a threat to native birds with their hunger for eggs. The state spent almost \$1 million last year on research and removal of tegus from environmentally sensitive areas.

The state restricted the sale and ownership of Burmese pythons in 2010 when it included the snake on the so-called conditional species list.

Now FWC says the tegu has the potential to be just as destructive as the python. The lizard, a native of South America that can grow to four feet in length, is another likely escapee from the exotic pet trade. It has a preference for crocodile and tortoise eggs but has been documented eating hatchlings and native plants. Sightings have soared in South Miami-Dade and in Everglades National Park in the past few years. Last year several babies were found, a sign the large lizards have started to reproduce inside the park.

While Burmese pythons have been slithering around the Everglades for decades, tegus are relatively new. Last year 34 tegus were removed from Everglades National Park, and 958 were trapped in areas adjacent to the park, compared with nine tegus captured inside in 2019 and 584 just outside. The first tegu was reported in the park in 2017. Now there are four well-established populations in Florida with reports as far north as the Panhandle.

"Invasive species of animals and plants are one of the greatest challenges of our time. The spread of pythons in South Florida taught us a difficult lesson," park Superintendent Pedro Ramos said. "Now it is up to all of us, government and citizens, to come together not only to prevent further spread of species of high concern such as the python and the tegus, but also to avoid additional species from establishing populations in our environment."

But lizard and snake keepers say that prohibiting their trade is regulatory overreach. They say that banning certain species from commercial activities won't solve the invasive reptile problem because some of these animals, like the green iguana and pythons, are way past the point of containment. Reptile business owners also say the proposed rules are not based on science, and that they will hurt an industry that for the most part plays by the rules.

"Instead of targeting us and coming up with new rules, they should focus on removing the invasive species that are already in the wild," said Phil Goss, president of the national U.S. Association of Reptile Keepers.

By prohibiting trade in high-demand lizards like the tegu, wildlife managers will eliminate part of the solution, he said, as several reptile breeders also capture and export the invaders, effectively acting as removal agents while also educating people about responsible pet ownership.

In a call to action asking members to send comments to FWC, the association known as USARK said: "This is not about stopping potentially invasive species from establishing in Florida. It is about overreaching policy based upon tyrannical ideology trumping logic and common sense."

USARK also said the exotic pet industry employs thousands of people in Florida who will lose their jobs because of "a few bad apples who let animals escape in the past," according to Goss.

"What we are asking for is to get everyone around the table to talk about solutions that will truly help address the issue of invasive species," he said.

After first presenting the draft regulation in July, [wildlife managers](#) clarified some rules about the sale of iguanas and tegus out of state. FWC will allow trappers and others in the reptile business to catch the animals in the wild and sell them outside of Florida. Iguana trappers were originally concerned the new rules could somehow affect their businesses, but removal and eradication programs will likely continue to expand.

Tegus have been reported in Georgia, where they have established small populations in at least three counties. In South Carolina, less than eight sightings last year led the Department of Natural Resources to unanimously approve this month regulations that will end the possession, sale, import and breeding of the [species](#).

Some exotic pet store owners fear the new regulation will vilify animals that make great pets. Amir Soleymani, owner of Miami Reptile Company, said tegus are smart lizards that can be trained with clickers just like dogs. They form affectionate bonds with owners and help improve people's mental health, he said.

"Pet lizards can have a calming and positive effect on people, and that's especially important during these stressful times," Soleymani said. "Most reptile breeders are responsible keepers, and most [pet owners](#) are conscientious owners. These rules are simply unfair."

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