Invasive Species

Introduction

Think for a moment about the plants and animals you see in backyards, in parks, or in the wild. Some of these species have been living in your area for thousands of years. Any species that was present in North America before European settlement we call a native species. Many species you may think of as natural to your area were actually brought here from other continents by people. Plants and animals that were brought here from other places are called "exotic," "alien," or "non-native." Some non-native species were brought here deliberately. Others were brought by people by accident. Many of these non-native species are harmless or even beneficial, but some become aggressive in their new home. We call these "invasive species."

Invasive species include plants, plant pathogens, insects, fish, reptiles, mammals, and many other species. Invasive species harm natural ecosystems. For instance, invasive plants displace native plants and create barren expanses that are inhospitable for native insects, birds and animals. Invasive fish prey on native fish and can cause natural food webs to collapse. Scientists consider invasive species to be one of the top two threats to biodiversity, second only to habitat loss.

Questions about Invasive Species:

1. Why do invasive species behave differently in new places than they do in their native habitats?

2. Why are invasive species considered problematic?

3. Where is the cane toad from originally?

4. What problems did the cane toad cause in Austraila?

5. What do you think should be done to control the cane toad?

6. What are other invasive species (perhaps there are some in your own backyard...)?

Invasion Of Gigantic Burmese Pythons In South Florida Appears To Be Rapidly Expanding

ScienceDaily (May 20, 2008) — The invasion of gigantic Burmese pythons in South Florida appears to be rapidly expanding, according to a new report from a University of Florida researcher who's been chasing the snakes since 2005.

Associate professor Frank Mazzotti of UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has published a new fact sheet outlining updated python statistics and methods being used to find and eliminate the snakes.

The new document follows the February release of a U. S. Geological Survey climate map that showed — based solely on climate, not habitat — pythons could potentially survive across the lower third of the United States.

Though Mazzotti's findings may make some nervous, he said the information should be reassuring. Knowing the extent of a problem makes it much easier to solve, he said.

"All of this is good. We've defined the problem, and science is really coming to the aid of management efforts," he said.

He stresses that humans are far more likely to be hurt by animals that don't typically induce fear, such as hitting a deer with one's car or being bitten by a dog, than by the nonvenomous snakes. But now, solving the problem must become a priority, Mazzotti said.

"People might argue the ultimate boundaries, but there's no part of this state that you can point at and say that pythons couldn't live here," he said. "We really need to be addressing the spread of these pythons. They're capable of surviving anywhere in Florida, they're capable of incredible movement — and in a relatively short period."

Pythons are likely to colonize anywhere alligators live, he said — including North Florida, Georgia and Louisiana. So far, most of the snakes have been found in Everglades National Park, but they've moved beyond its borders, too: as far north as Manatee County.

The Burmese python, native to Burma in Southeast Asia, is one of the world's largest snake species. The largest found in the Everglades was 16 feet long and 152 pounds.

Mazzotti said there are a few places where eradication of the snakes might be possible, such as the Florida Keys. "We need to do something so that five years from now, we're not looking at an exponentially bigger population in those areas because we didn't go in and get the first ones before they started breeding," he said.

In most places, he said, the best strategy is likely a larger, focused effort to contain and reduce the population by tracking, capturing and euthanizing the reptiles.

"As soon as you know they're breeding, eradication gets to be out of the question," he said. "Females may store sperm, so they can produce fertile clutches for years. And a 100-something pound snake can easily be producing 60, 80 eggs a year."

State rules that went into effect this year should help, including a $100 annual permit to own "reptiles of concern," and a mandatory microchip, he said. But it's imperative that more be done to educate people about the problem of turning loose non-native species, he said.

Other highlights from Mazzotti's fact sheet:

- From 2002-2005, 201 pythons were captured or found dead in and around Everglades National Park. In 2006-2007, the number more than doubled, to 418. Everglades wildlife biologist Skip Snow has estimated the population at more than 30,000.
- Since May 2006, trackers have found seven pregnant female snakes and one nest of eggs; one recently captured python had 85 developing eggs.
- Autopsied pythons found in Key Largo contained the remains of the endangered Key Largo woodrat. Other species on the pythons' prey menu include rabbit, gray squirrel, fox squirrel, domestic cats, raccoons, bobcats, white-tailed deer, limpkin, white ibis and the American alligator.
- Not only are pythons fantastic swimmers, they can cover a lot of ground, as well. Two pythons with surgically implanted radio transmitters were found to have traveled 35 miles and 43 miles. Trackers stepped in and caught the male, concerned that it was too close to homes near a Miccosukee Indian Reservation.