

## News From the Watershed

Exotic pests are just as much a danger to state as exotic plants.

Last week I wrote about non-native, invasive plants in Florida and how harmful they are to our environment. But did you know that there are many species of exotic pests and animals as well? Many of these species have proved detrimental to the natural habitat of our beautiful state. In fact, in the last decade, scientists have stated that exotic pests are the second greatest threat to biodiversity. The number one threat is, of course, the destruction of natural plant communities and habitat loss.

The federal government defines invasive exotics as “species that are nonnative to a given ecosystem and whose introduction causes, or is likely to cause, economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.” Concern over these exotics is justifiable. The federal government spends over \$137 billion annually in damage and control measures in an effort to keep these species under control. In addition, keeping these pests in check has become even more of a challenge because of increased travel and trade.

These pests also cause many problems in the agricultural industry. We have all heard about the horrors of Citrus canker, a disease affecting citrus trees. This disease comes from the bacterium *Xanthomonas axonopodis*. It is believed to have originated in South East Asia and has caused problems all over the world. There are many other “pests” which, even though, may be too small to be seen with the naked eye, are causing many challenges for land owners and our government in an effort to keep them under control.

Other exotic species which have proven harmful to the natural habitat may have actually been purposefully set “free” in the wild. For example, people who no longer want the exotic pets that they purchased may have the idea that they are providing a good home for them if they allow them to go “back to nature.” Many exotic pets are able to survive in Florida because it is similar to the climate in which they originated. However, according to Everglades Park Rangers, animal encounters such as those between the exotic python and the native alligator can “hurt local wildlife and disrupt the fragile ecosystem.” Rangers reported that they have seen alligators and pythons fighting for hours and hours, each fight resulting in either injury or death to one of the animals.

The Division of Freshwater Fisheries is concerned about the number of exotic fishes that are residing in the waters of Florida. There are at least 32 species of freshwater fish that have been introduced either intentionally or illegally by humans. Some have been released in much the same way as the python to the Everglades, by a pet owner dumping their aquarium into a nearby body of water. Some have gotten into our waters by the flooding of aquaculture ponds. Most of these types of fish came from either South America, Africa or Southeast Asia and therefore, are quite comfortable in our warm waters. Like exotic plants, the presence of these fish can be detrimental to native species. These invasive species alter the natural energy flow through aquatic ecosystems, compete or mate with native species, and can carry harmful parasites and diseases. In addition, some exotic species such as piranha can be harmful to man.

We have only scratched the surface regarding invasive exotic animals in Florida. Other species include the armadillo, feral hog, red fox, rhesus monkey, feral cat, ferret, Gambian pouch rat and the Cuban brown anole.

Florida has become a dumping ground for exotic animals. As a result, Florida is now faced with a tremendous burden regarding non-native species. So, if you get tired of your pet, make sure to find it a proper home. Don't let it loose in the wild. Let's help keep Florida in its natural state.