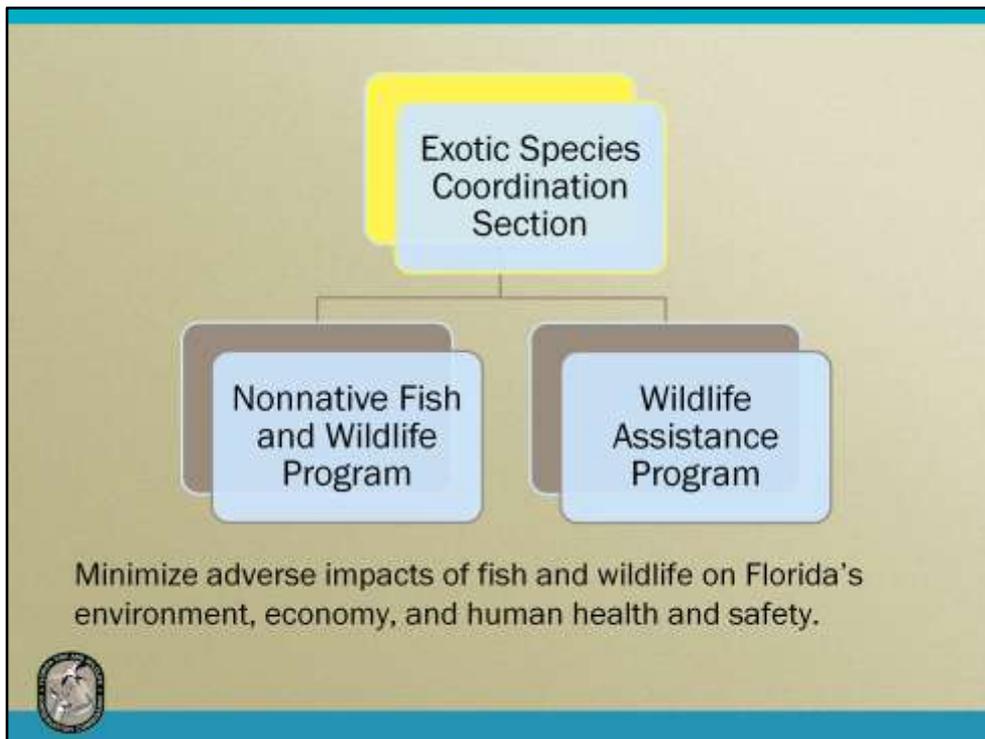


The Exotic Species Coordination Section is within the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation. Some examples of exotic wildlife include the lionfish, Burmese python, and Argentine black and white tegu. The Division recently reorganized to help better address the adverse impacts of both native and nonnative wildlife.
Author: Kristen Penney Sommers
Report Date: March 10, 2014



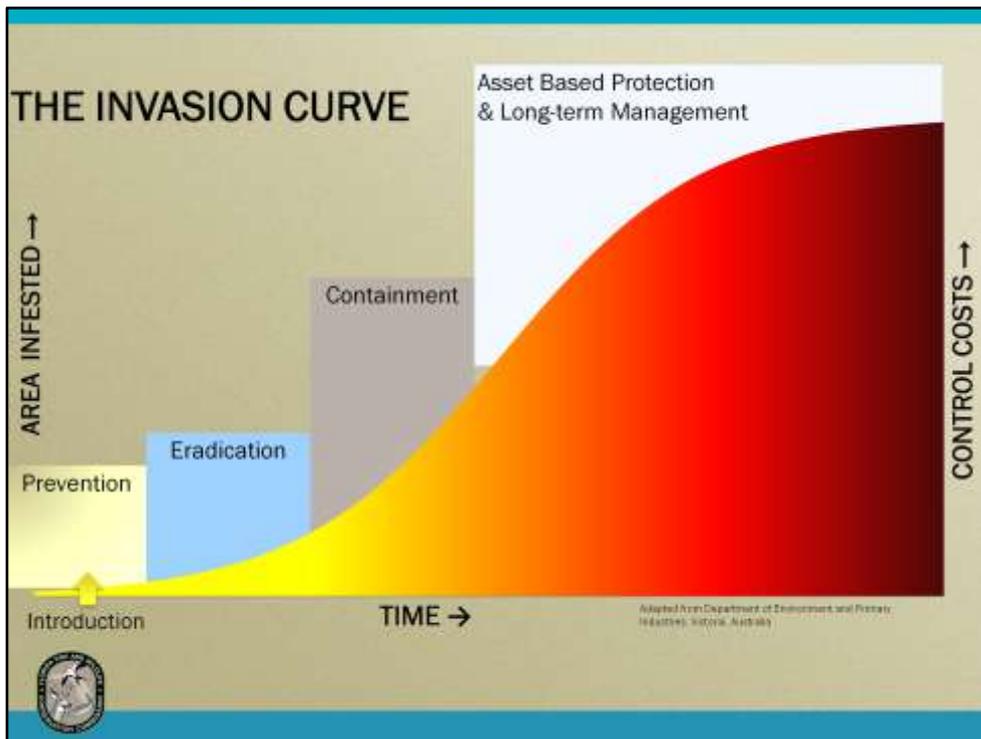
The Exotic Species Coordination Section was created during the agency's 2004 reorganization in response to stakeholder opinion that FWC needed a broader commitment to exotic and invasive species. After a recent examination of our management systems within the agency, addressing potential adverse impacts of all wildlife – native and nonnative - became the focus. A recommendation was presented to move the staff who respond to traditional nuisance wildlife, which is called the Wildlife Assistance Program, into the Exotic Species Coordination Section, and reorganize the section to address the more holistic function of addressing problematic wildlife. The Exotic Species Coordination Section is now comprised of two programs, the Wildlife Assistance Program and the Nonnative Fish and Wildlife Program. The Section mission is to minimize the adverse impacts of fish and wildlife on Florida's environment, economy, and human health and safety.

Nonnative Fish and Wildlife Program

- Over 600 nonnative wildlife species have been observed
- More than 150 are thought to have reproducing populations



Although invasive species are not a problem unique to Florida, Florida's subtropical climate has been conducive to the expansion of many exotic species including pythons, large lizards such as monitors and iguanas, many freshwater fish species and more recently lionfish. The citizens of Florida, particularly south Florida, frequently encounter these exotic species. The Nonnative Fish and Wildlife Program strives to prevent the unauthorized introduction and establishment of nonnative fish and animals and to use risk-based management for established or recently released species. For example, Oustalet's chameleons are now reproducing in parts of south Florida.



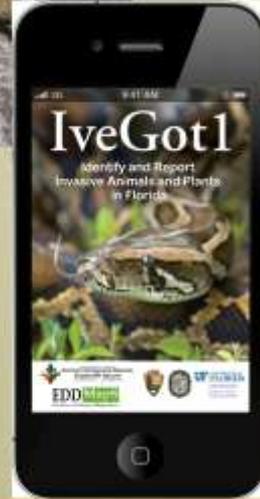
Our program is charged with determining which of the nonnative fish and wildlife species may become established and cause a problem. The slide illustrates what has been referred to as the invasion curve. As more area becomes infested, the less likely the species will be eradicated and costs of management go up.

A study in the United Kingdom indicated that only 10% of introduced species survive and establish; of those that establish, 10% go on to become invasive, i.e. harmful to native wildlife or human health or safety. This has been referred to as the “rule of 10s.” In Florida, a greater proportion of introduced species have become established, roughly 25%, with perhaps 15% of those invasive in some context and to some degree. However, the Florida experience is consistent with the general belief that a minority of nonnative species are demonstrably problematic.

Preventing the release and establishment of nonnative wildlife is clearly the key.

Activities

- Prevention
- Early Detection
- Rapid Response
- Control/Management
- Education/Outreach



The primary activities of the Nonnative Fish and Wildlife Program include Prevention, Rapid Response, Control and Management Strategies, and Education and Outreach. We work closely with other government agencies and NGOs to coordinate our actions and leverage resources.

Exotic Pet Amnesty Program

- Since 2006, 25 Exotic Pet Amnesty events held statewide



- More than 1,700 unwanted nonnative pets surrendered at no cost or penalty
- Since 2012, exotic pets no longer wanted can be surrendered year-round to the FWC



The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Exotic Pet Amnesty Program is an innovative effort to prevent the unlawful release of nonnative animals into the wild. This program provides exotic pet owners with an opportunity to surrender or re-home their exotic pet. The program also provides education and outreach on responsible pet ownership and exotic species in Florida. The Invasive Species Hotline now serves a dual purpose -Callers can report sightings of exotic species or get help finding homes for exotic pets.

Burmese Python Initiatives

- Interagency Coordination
- 2013 Python Challenge™
- Python Patrol Network
- Hunting on WMAs
- Python Removal Program



Over the course of the last two years, FWC has started to take a larger coordination role with our partner agencies on python issues. In 2013, we held our first Python Executive Leadership Workshop and helped to organize an Interagency Large Constrictor Science and Management workshop. We also held our first Python Challenge. The Python Patrol Program, adopted by FWC from the Nature Conservancy, is a training program that provides education to citizens, natural resource workers, and local LE agencies that may encounter pythons in either the wild or in their line of work. Other ongoing activities include the ability for licensed hunters to be able to remove Burmese pythons from the 4 WMAs where pythons have been documented, and our python removal program that allows people experienced with large constrictors to help remove pythons from state lands.

Wildlife Assistance Program



- Responsive staff providing technical assistance
- Pro-active engagement of communities and neighborhoods
- Partnerships and coordination with other agencies and NGOs



Photo credit: Defenders of Wildlife



The Wildlife Assistance Program was formalized and established within the section in 2013 to recognize the increasing importance of addressing and/or responding to human-wildlife conflict. Previously, this role was managed regionally. This statewide approach will allow the agency to address human-wildlife conflict and coexistence using a more holistic approach. The primary goal of the Wildlife Assistance Program is to work with the public to foster co-existence with wildlife. These responsibilities include responding to the public's immediate needs by providing technical assistance. FWC receives over 30,000 phone calls a year in regards to problematic wildlife. Staff also is working towards developing partnerships, leveraging resources with local government agencies, state extension agents, and NGOs and engaging proactively with communities and neighborhoods.

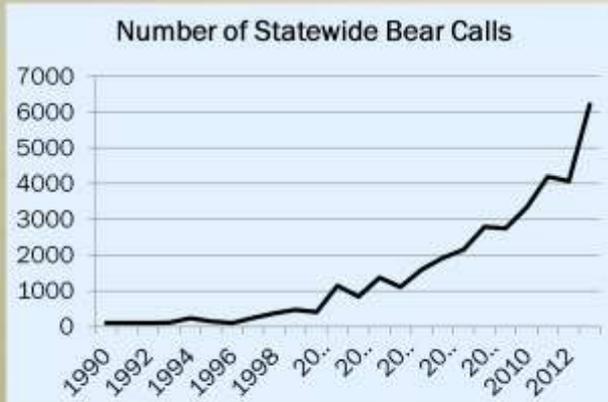
Education, Outreach and Technical Assistance



Wildlife Assistance Biologists form the front line for citizens needing additional biological or technical assistance. One scientist is located in each of the regional offices to provide customer service and assistance over phone, in writing and in person. Essentially, these staff members function as the hub of the wheel in addressing citizen's needs. They work closely across agency programs, and many times with agency partners, to ensure that the appropriate information and/or response is provided.

Wildlife Assistance Program and Human-Bear Conflict Response

- Front-line call response
- Coordination of field response
- Education of the public



A good example of the coordination role that our scientists provide is the role of Wildlife Assistance Program when the agency is contacted in regards to human-bear conflict. The Wildlife Assistance Biologists respond directly to calls from members of the public who are having bear conflict related issues, provide technical assistance to reduce bear conflict, and coordinate the deployment of the Bear Response Agents/Contractors and other regional agency staff as needed to address regional bear management response needs. They have their fingers on the pulse of local bear issues.

Future Direction

- Development of statewide wildlife assistance policy
- Data-driven, targeted, pro-active approach
- Developing more partnerships to leverage resources
- Working with stakeholders



A surrendered red-footed tortoise at a Pet Amnesty Event



Our section is developing long-term goals that will help guide our future actions. We are currently developing statewide consistency in how we address wildlife conflict issues as they arise. We are working towards being more pro-active and targeted, using data collected to help us assess where to target our time, talent and resources. With that, we recognize that developing more partnerships is crucial to leveraging resources and provides additional opportunities. Finally, in the next year, we will be working more closely with stakeholders to identify areas where we can improve.

Thank You



Image courtesy of Edward Mercer



In conclusion, thank you for the opportunity to provide this update today. We welcome any suggestions, comments or questions you may have for us at this time.