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Secretary Salazar Announces Renewed Commitment, Expanded Programs to Eliminate Pythons from Everglades

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today announced today that the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in partnership with the State of Florida and other stakeholders, are renewing their commitment and expanding existing programs to eliminate Burmese pythons from the Everglades.

“Burmese pythons are an invasive species that have no place in the Everglades and threaten its delicate ecosystem,” Salazar said. “We are committed to aggressively combating this threat, including having trained and well-supervised volunteers hunt down and remove snakes.”

“I have also directed my staff to look at the possibility of allocating additional federal resources this fiscal year and I have asked federal and state agencies to work with us to quickly develop an action plan to control this invasive species,” he said.

The Burmese python (*Python molurus*), a large exotic snake, is well-established in the Everglades. Everglades National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, and the Water Conservation Areas, represent the core areas of the python infestation.

As effective predators, pythons are having negative impacts on native species in the Everglades ecosystem. Because of the serious threat posed by pythons, the National Park Service (NPS), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), along with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the South Florida Water Management District, and many other partners are actively engaged in a large variety of potential python control efforts.

Pythons are cryptic animals – they blend into their environments extremely well - making them difficult to efficiently locate and capture. Most python sightings and captures occur in developed areas, such as roads and canal levees, which comprise only a small percentage of potential python habitats.

Pythons have been observed within the largely inaccessible and remote mangrove forests of the parks. Conservatively, scientists believe that only small fractions (0.1-5%) of pythons present on NPS lands are detected. Given these challenges, the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service have recognized the need to consider and implement a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to python control. These efforts include:

Expansion of an authorized agent python capture program – For several years, NPS has partnered with up to a dozen experienced and highly motivated volunteer authorized agents that have removed hundreds of pythons. Data from these captures has been invaluable to park biologists in developing other control tools and assessing impact this invasive snake is having on native resources. The NPS is working on expanding the authorized agent program to provide more thorough and regular efforts to remove pythons. The Park Service is also working closely with the Florida Fish and Wildlife

Conservation Commission to evaluate the State's pilot bounty permit system and consider its appropriateness for NPS lands.

Pilot "Partner with Hunters" Program in Big Cypress National Preserve – The NPS and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission are working together to partner with licensed hunters that hunt game species within the Preserve under Florida state law. The "Partner with Hunters" program will allow trained, qualified, and licensed hunters the opportunity to terminate pythons, a non-game species, with the use of their firearm if they come across one during the course of their normal hunting activity. The snakes will be collected by the NPS and data gathered will be used for research/ monitoring and control efforts. Existing hunting activities and supporting infrastructure, including law enforcement, hunting check stations, and use of off-road vehicles, makes the Preserve an appropriate location for piloting this program in partnership with the hunting community.

Everglades invasive animal response team – NPS is actively working with FWS and USGS to establish a Federally-funded invasive animal rapid response and control team that would provide full-time coordination among the south Florida natural resource management agencies, including field operations, science support, and educational and outreach efforts.

Cooperative workshops – FWS has organized and facilitated multi-agency workshops to address the threats posed by pythons and help prioritize and coordinate management efforts. NPS and FWS provide leadership to the Everglades Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area, a multi-agency team, to better coordinate and pool resources.

Risk Assessment and review of control methods – FWS and NPS are funding a USGS risk assessment project to help define the nature of the threat and develop biological/management profiles for nine large constrictor snakes. The risk assessment will contain information that has broad application to the management of pythons and other large exotic constrictors in the U.S.

Study of python movements and habitat use – NPS is working with USGS, University of Florida, and Davidson College to understand python movement and habitat use in the Everglades. These efforts, including radio tracking snakes to allow scientists to follow them, often finding other snakes, and providing critical information to formulate effective control programs.

Python trap and attractant development – NPS and FWS are funding development of an effective python trap and lure along with USGS, University of Florida, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, NPS is cooperating with an NGO to conduct preliminary research on python pheromones which may someday be used as an attractant for trapping. Prototype traps are deployed in North Key Largo in hopes of halting the spread of pythons to the Florida Keys and traps will soon be deployed in known python concentrations around Everglades National Park.

Unmanned aerial vehicles and thermal imaging – NPS is working with USGS and the University of Florida to test small, remotely operated airplanes and heat-detecting sensors for use in detecting pythons in the Everglades. These technologies may be useful to detect and aid in the capture of pythons in their natural habitats.

Diet Studies – NPS, in conjunction with the University of Florida and the Smithsonian Institution, is analyzing gut contents of captured pythons and identifying prey items to better understand the python's impacts on native species.

Mercury bioaccumulation studies – NPS has partnered with USGS to understand mercury concentrations in python tissue because high mercury concentrations may pose a risk to human health if pythons are consumed. This information is critical to inform the current development of python collecting and hunting programs.

Reporting mechanisms – NPS established a python hotline for public reporting of python observations.

Education and outreach – NPS and FWS have worked cooperatively with our partners at the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the South Florida Water Management District to develop signs that remind the public that release of snakes and other exotics is a crime. We have implemented the "Don't Let It Loose" public and school education campaign and endorsed Habitatitude to promote responsible pet ownership. NPS recently printed and distributed over 450,000 copies of "Florida Invaders" to educate the public about the threat of invasive nonnative plants and animals. The FWS and NPS participated in the recent State-sponsored Non-native Pet Amnesty Day event held at the Miami Zoo educating the public about pythons and other non-native invasive wildlife.

"The removal of invasive pythons from the Everglades is a key step in our larger ecosystem restoration efforts," said Dan Kimball, superintendent, Everglades National Park. "Our success will fully depend on how well we can cooperate, partner, learn from each other, and maintain a high level of commitment to addressing this problem in the long term."

"Eliminating these exotic pythons in Florida will require a full partnership between federal and state agencies and with the assistance from trained members of the public," said Pedro Ramos, superintendent, Big Cypress National Preserve. "These joint efforts will provide vital information on the animals' movement, habitat use, food sources and other information which will aid in future improvements of eradication methods."

"Addressing the python threat requires a broad partnership with many strategies," said Paul Souza, South Florida Ecological Services field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "There is no one silver bullet. We are committed to continuing our work with our partners in the State of Florida to make headway on this significant challenge."

Together, the NPS, FWS, and their partners will continue their efforts to implement a variety of python management efforts to control and hopefully eradicate the Burmese python in south Florida.

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