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Media contact: Pat Haire, 941-861-5104; cell 941-650-2850; pnaire@scgov.net
Project contact: Chance Steed, 941-861-6355; cell 941-650-1206; csteed@scgov.net

County adopts plan to manage exotic reptiles

On Jan. 12, Sarasota County commissioners adopted the Exotic Reptile Management Plan (ERMP) to deal with the emergence of non-native, or exotic, reptiles. The expanding population of these reptiles, primarily iguanas, monitors and pythons, adversely impacts natural systems and threatens protected wildlife.

“These are very harmful species to the area,” says Environmental Specialist Chance Steed. “Besides posing a threat to our protected native species such as gopher tortoises, sea turtles and Florida Scrub-jays, they also damage private property.” Steed says that local population levels are still low enough to take a proactive approach that may prevent a repeat of the costly, ongoing battle being fought against these reptiles through other parts of Florida.

According to Steed, the goal of the ERMP is to reduce the overall exotic species reptile population. The ERMP establishes a strategic plan to monitor populations, provide for public outreach, education and research, and conduct focused removal activities on public land.

Breeding populations of black spiny tail iguanas are already present at Blind Pass Park, Lemon Bay Park and Shamrock Park. They’ve been sighted in these coastal parks and a handful of neighborhoods as far north as Siesta Key.

Sarasota County has been tracking and removing large exotic lizards from public lands since 2004, when two iguanas showed up at Lemon Bay Park. It’s illegal to release or relocate one of these reptiles. It is likely the first such reptiles observed on county lands were released as pets. The recent influx of the black spiny tail iguanas now reproducing in Sarasota County are either the results of released pets or the possible northward expansion of the population that has gained such a stronghold on Gasparilla Island in Charlotte and Lee counties.

During a pilot exotic reptile removal project during August and September of 2009, 146 black spiny tail iguanas were moved from Blind Pass Park and 14 from Lemon Bay Park. A second removal effort will take place in January and February of this year.

Steed says that anyone who sees an exotic reptile should report it to the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 for removal. The county’s Web site, www.scgov.net, includes a link to the ERMP, background information on exotic reptiles, exotic reptile sighting reporting forms and additional resources.

For more information about the county's exotic reptile management efforts, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000.

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