

South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force

Invasive Exotic Species Strategic Action Framework

Prevention Case Study: Exotic Pet Amnesty Program

The Exotic Pet Amnesty Program is an innovative effort by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) that provides exotic pet owners with an opportunity to surrender or re-home their exotic pet. The goals of the Exotic Pet Amnesty Program are to reduce the number of exotic pets released in Florida and provide amnesty for animals that require permits, including conditional species such as the Burmese python. The program also serves to provide education and outreach regarding responsible pet ownership and invasive exotic species in Florida.

Case Presentation

The Exotic Pet Amnesty Program was started in 2006 as periodic one-day-only events across the state of Florida where people could come and surrender their exotic animals, no questions asked. Surrendered animals were then looked over by volunteer veterinarians and all healthy animals were held for adoptions later that same day. These events were linked with multiple exhibitors providing people with the opportunity to learn more about invasive exotic species and animal care. In later years, events were combined with existing festivals and outreach events. Avoiding the responsibility of long-term housing of the animals allows the Exotic Pet Amnesty Program to be successful with a low budget. This program also relies heavily on volunteers from outside organizations.

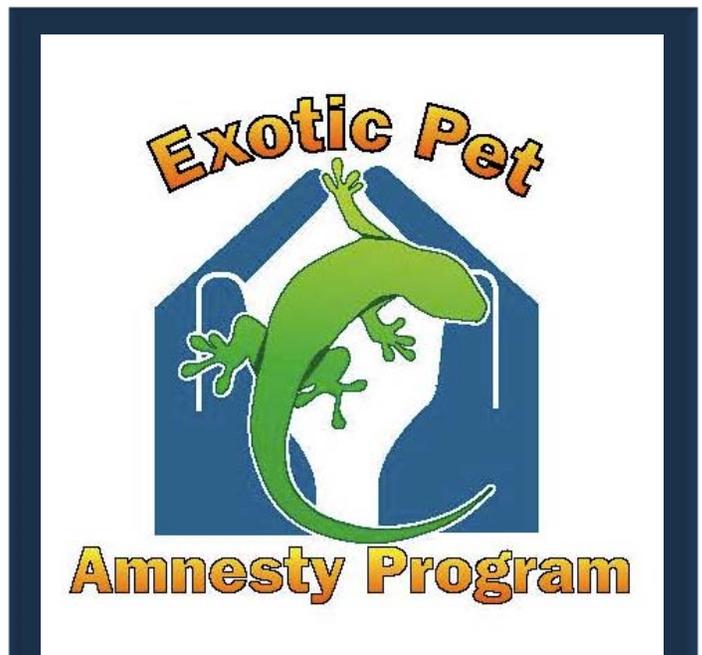
The occurrence of Exotic Pet Amnesty Program events has been increased over the last few years with 15 of the 25 total events taking place in the last 3 years. Additionally, the distribution of the events has been expanded with the first Florida panhandle event in 2013. With the increased number and location of Exotic Pet Amnesty Program events, the number of animals placed into new homes through the program has also increased. Since 2006, 2,340 animals have been placed into new homes through the Exotic Pet Amnesty Program. Over 1,000 of those animals were placed within the last 3 years.

Also, the increase in event number and location has allowed the Exotic Pet Amnesty Program to act as a

catalyst to inform the public about the dangers of releasing nonnative animals into the wild. The ability to reach the public through this program has been widely successful.

Management Actions and Outcomes

The Exotic Pet Amnesty Program has evolved and improved over the program's history. For instance, at early events, animals were adopted by people vetted that same day. As the program has grown, the adopter application process has become more sophisticated. Now a database is kept of approved Exotic Pet Amnesty Program adopters across the state of Florida. This database allows the FWC to search specific counties for adopters interested in specific categories of animals and helps to make adoptions outside of amnesty events possible. Having online applications and time to vet adopters before events allows the FWC to verify an applicant's permits and check for any wildlife violations prior to approving them as an adopter with the program.



For more information:

<http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/amnesty-program/> OR
888-lve-Got1 (888-483-4681)

Interested in Adopting an Animal?

- Fill out and submit an application at www.MyFWC.com/Nonnatives.
- Complete an “adopter information form” along with the “animal information forms” for the animals you are interested in adopting.
- Applicants who are approved as adopters will receive a letter of acceptance from the FWC and will be informed of upcoming Exotic Pet Amnesty Days in their area.
- All adopters must apply and be approved before adopting an animal at an Exotic Pet Amnesty Day event.

Additionally, in October of 2010, a grant from the National Park Service (NPS) increased dedicated funding to the Exotic Pet Amnesty Program which facilitated the introduction or improvement of key factors including the hiring of a new staff member and the purchase of an amnesty specific trailer.

Using funding from the NPS grant, a part-time (20 hours per week) operator was hired to answer the Exotic Species Reporting Hotline (1-888-Ive-Got1). As part of the program, the operator would also facilitate amnesty adoptions through the hotline as they were received. With the addition of the hotline, and staffing to monitor the hotline, the number of animals placed through the program increased dramatically. Since the hotline has been in operation as an Exotic Pet Amnesty Program tool, 687 animals have been placed into new homes through the hotline. It should be noted that during this same time period, 986 animals were placed into new homes through Exotic Pet Amnesty Program events. Thus, the effectiveness of the program more than doubled with the addition of the hotline and staff to facilitate adoptions through it.

Using grant funding, a trailer was purchased to comfortably house surrendered animals safely and securely during an event. This trailer was created specifically for the Exotic Pet Amnesty Program making it very useful for the program’s unique needs. The trailer contains multiple ‘snake racks’ along one wall which can

be used to house animals in a low stress and comfortable environment throughout an event. On the opposite wall the trailer has shelving which allows space for larger cages to be stored during the event. The rear door of the trailer becomes a ramp so people can enter through the rear and exit through the front side door, improving the flow of an event during the adoption period. The trailer also has aero roof vents and a quiet, induction generator which allows the vehicle to be cooled or heated as needed to keep the animals comfortable during an event. The trailer is mobile and can be transported across the state to be used at all Exotic Pet Amnesty Day events. Additionally, the size of the trailer makes it a usable billboard to promote the program while it is being transported from one event to another.

Key Recommendations/Issues

The Exotic Pet Amnesty Program has been successful as a tool for preventing the release of exotic pets in Florida by facilitating the adoption of 2,340 animals since 2006. Additionally, 86 conditional constrictors were placed into permitted facilities through this program, including 79 Burmese pythons. As with all programs and projects, improvement would be possible particularly with the addition of dedicated staff and increased outreach campaigns to attract potential adopters and expand to areas that haven’t yet hosted an Exotic Pet Amnesty Day event.

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This document is part of a series of case studies developed for the Invasive Exotic Species (IES) Strategic Action Framework. This particular case study highlights issues within the Prevention Phase of the IES Invasion Curve. 6/1/15