

Tips for Pet Owners

It's the owner's responsibility to provide adequate food, shelter and activity to ensure healthy pets. Before buying or adopting any domestic or exotic animal, make sure to learn about their caging and food requirements. Ask your veterinary clinic if they treat the type of pet you're thinking of buying. Never release an unwanted pet into the wild - it's against the law. Find a new home for your exotic pets through Non-native Amnesty Day Events sponsored by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. Domestic animals (dogs and cats) can be placed in new homes through the SPCA or local animal welfare programs.

Here are a few tips for good pet ownership that protect our native species and ecosystems.

FISH



Do not dump unwanted fish in any body of water.

Avoid runoffs from fish ponds that may introduce non-native fish or eggs to local ecosystems. This is equally important for plants and invertebrates.

Find new homes for your overgrown fish by searching local fish clubs or aquarists.

REPTILES



Do not release them into the wild. It's dangerous for the animal and can become an ecological problem.

Provide them with escape-proof cages and don't allow them outside unsupervised.

Find them a foster home, or surrender to wildlife agencies or responsible collectors when unable to care for them anymore.

Microchip and register any non-native snake.

BIRDS



Safe-trim your birds' wings to keep them from getting hurt and to prevent them from escaping.

Do not allow free-flying birds outdoors. This practice is dangerous for your bird and may contribute to the establishment of a feral population if it escapes.

DOGS



When you spay or neuter your dog, you're helping to reduce overpopulation.

Use a leash on your dog when walking on any public site, even if regulations are not in place. It's safer for your dog. Take your dog to designated dog parks where they can run freely.

Do not feed stray dogs unless you're planning to keep them. Call your local animal control.

Microchipping your pet will ensure a safe return.

Fence your yard to prevent the dog from roaming and do not leave food outside, as it attracts local wildlife such as raccoons and coyotes.

CATS



Spay & neuter your cat.

Keep your cats indoors and provide them with enough toys to keep them distracted from going outside.

Introduce your cat to the use of a harness or an outside enclosure.

Be alert when opening doors - cats can sneak out without you realizing it.

Microchip your cat; it can save its life if ever caught by animal control.

Fact: Florida has more than 275 invasive animal species, one of the highest invasion rates of any state.

Remember: It is illegal to release any non-native species in Florida without the proper permit from the Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. Rule 68-5.001 For more information on non-native species and regulations visit: <http://myfwc.com/nonnatives>

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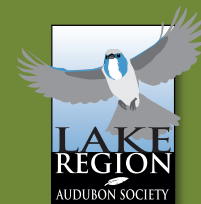
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Protecting our Native Wildlife

A Guide To Responsible Pet Ownership



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The Problem with Exotic Species

Exotic reptiles, birds, fish, amphibians & mammals are popular pets in our society. Unfortunately, these animals are non-native species that can cause habitat degradation and damage to our local wildlife when released into the wild. These exotic animals compete with native species for food, shelter and other resources such as nesting habitats. Historically, many established exotics have caused the extinction of a number of species worldwide. These animals have changed or imposed pressure on



native populations to the point of extinction. Since the introduction in Guam of the brown tree snake, nine of 11 species of native forest birds have been extirpated. Pythons are a recent addition to the south Florida ecosystems and their impact on local

species is yet to be seen. Our native species are not prepared to defend themselves from these exotic predators and in most cases do not even associate them with a threatening species.

While many exotic animal species arrive accidentally through the importation of plants, fruit, and goods from other countries, most of our current invasive species are the result of irresponsible pet owners who mistakenly think that releasing their beloved pet is a better option than surrendering it to local wildlife agencies, or animal control, where they may be euthanized. These pet owners fail to recognize the ecological impact and ignore the fact that adoptions provide a better solution to their problem and protect our biodiversity.

Additional Effects

Exotics may impact our local species in more than one way, and can have a negative effect on public health and the economy. Birds such as the monk parakeet are known for causing major power outages due to their habit of building their nests on power stations and transmission towers, costing millions of dollars yearly on repairs. The feral hog, with its insatiable appetite, can destroy large patches of native vegetation, including endangered plants and animals, and can cause erosion problems. They also cause considerable damage to commercial agriculture and can carry and spread diseases such as tuberculosis. Starlings and the



south Florida reef ecosystems after some hobbyists released them when they grew too large for their tanks. This venomous species threatens to eliminate many reef species. Those species that are found to be detrimental to our ecosystems are usually managed to avoid expansion of their range and population. New laws and regulations are being imposed to reduce the number of feral exotics by holding pet owners responsible for their pets through the use of microchipping and by requiring permits for their possession.



rock pigeons are serious disease vectors for livestock and humans. Several species of Asian carps introduced in the United States are competing with native species, causing losses to the fishing industry. The Lionfish, native to the Indo-Pacific, has invaded the

Our Domestic Pets

Abandoned domesticated animals have a similar devastating effect on our ecosystems. When abandoned, dogs and cats will rely to some extent on their native predatory instinct to survive. It's obvious that even with their predatory instincts, most dog or cat colonies are established near human settlements where they earn added support from well-meaning, but misinformed, humans. Several cases of wild dog packs have been reported in the country, and the number of feral cats colonies is on the rise, with more than 60 million feral cats roaming the country. Today the estimated cat population of the United States exceeds 100 million. Cats and dogs that are allowed outside without any restraints can hurt or kill native animals, including birds, mammals and reptiles. Many gopher tortoises are injured every year by dogs, and the number of birds killed or injured by cats is in the millions per year.



Outdoor living can have a negative impact on the lifespan of domestic animals. Interaction with local wildlife can have a devastating effect on your pet, and the chances of getting injured or killed are higher. Domestic pets that kill and eat wild animals are at risk of contracting parasites from their wild prey, or getting poisoned. One of the leading causes of death in domestic and feral cats is getting hit by cars. This is more common in urban

areas where cats are allowed to roam through busy streets.

Feral, Stray & Free Roaming

Feral animals are different from strays in that they were born in the wild. Strays are those that were domestic but were abandoned by their owner and depend heavily on humans to survive. Many pet owners ignore the fact that even when well-fed, their pets will chase, injure or kill small mammals, reptiles and birds.

Free roamers and strays differ from wild predators in three ways. First, they are not exposed to the same factors that control wild predators such as predation, competition and diseases because of vaccinations. Since food is supplied by their owners or caretakers, their populations are not controlled by prey availability. Additionally, these cat populations are not limited by territoriality. This is also true for managed colonies in which TNR (Trap, Neuter & Release) is being practiced.

A Social Problem

Many pet owners choose to ignore that their free roaming pet can be a nuisance to their neighbors. In urban areas where homes are developed at close proximity, a wandering pet soon enters the neighbor's property, causing problems that range from defecating to scratching paint on vehicles. People that enjoy watching wild birds are forced to remove their feeders to keep cats from preying on the visiting birds. Noisy dogs, cats and even birds are also of great concern, with the only difference being that rules are in place to protect homeowners from offending dogs, but there are none to protect them from cats or birds. Many cities have strict laws and ordinances in place for dog owners, including leash laws and canine waste laws. Dog owners can be fined if their dog becomes a nuisance or if they forget to clean after them while in a public park or strolling through the neighborhood. Good pet ownership is more than just providing food and shelter to your pet; it's also about being considerate to your neighbors.

