

Follow through, Florida. Crack down on sales, ownership of destructive non-native reptiles | Opinion

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It's hardly news that Florida has an invasive reptile problem.

But even for Floridians paying close attention, it's hard to keep up with the escalating harm non-native species pose to our native wildlife and ecosystems.

Non-native Burmese pythons are eating their way through the Everglades, contributing to substantial population declines — in some cases as [great as 99](#) percent — of small mammals such as raccoons, opossums, bobcats, foxes and rabbits.

Invasive green iguanas are digging into the foundations of dams and other key infrastructure, contributing to [nearly \\$2 million](#) in emergency repairs for just one dam.

During particularly severe winter freezes, iguanas [rain down](#) from the trees.

And if you happen upon a gopher tortoise burrow, you might see an Argentine black and white tegu lizard peeking out at you from the shadows. These [voracious](#) omnivores devour everything from turtle eggs to small animals to low-growing crops.

Together, these accounts read like a script for a blockbuster space-alien invasion movie — but there's a critical distinction.

Florida's non-native reptiles didn't invade — they were brought here by commercial breeders and sellers looking to profit off a booming exotic-pet market.

In many cases, individual animals escaped or were released, and the results have been catastrophic. Capitalizing on the warm weather and unsuspecting prey, these animals are overwhelming many of Florida's iconic native species. In the process, they are wreaking havoc on the state's unique sub-tropical ecosystems and food webs that have evolved over tens of thousands of years.

Despite these devastating consequences, Florida laws still allow some of the most highly invasive species to be commercially bred and traded in Florida.

Even just a few more escaped or released animals can establish invasive reptile populations in new places and genetically bolster existing populations. It's reckless and counterproductive to allow commercial breeding and importation of these species at the same time that we're frantically working to remove them from Florida's environment.

Fortunately, Florida wildlife officials are stepping up to protect native wildlife, wild places and the economy. Currently [proposed rules](#) would eliminate commercial breeding and pet ownership of some of the most highly invasive reptiles and limit their possession to permitted educational, research and control activities.

We hope the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will do more to limit who can possess these highly invasive wild species, but the agency's proposal does address the root causes of Florida's invasive reptile disaster — commercial breeding and trade.

The sad truth is that these captivating exotic reptiles suffer, too. By being in the wrong place at the wrong time, tegus, iguanas and constrictor snakes face a future of lethal management and eradication attempts as long as they're living in wild Florida.

[Paradoxically](#), as Floridians hunt down Burmese pythons to save the Everglades, these majestically powerful constrictor snakes are declining in their native habitats in southeast Asia because of illegal trade and habitat degradation.

In short, these highly invasive reptiles don't belong here in Florida. And we create an ecological, economic and ethical morass for ourselves by continuing to permit commercial importation and breeding here.

The proposed rules will help slow the accelerating harm and give us time to focus on effective strategies to halt further spread of the most invasive species.

It's a problem that we humans created. Now it's our job to take the aggressive steps necessary to stop the unprecedented harm to our precious native wildlife before it's too late.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will decide whether to adopt the Invasive Reptile Rule during its meeting on Feb. 25. The meeting begins at 9 a.m. The Commission will accept public comment by phone during the meeting. [Click here to access the phone number and the meeting.](#)

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