

1. AWARD NAME: INNOVATIVE PROGRAM AWARD

2. NOMINATOR: Maia McGuire, Sea Grant Extension Agent, Flagler County Extension Program, 150 Sawgrass Road, Bunnell, FL 32210. 386-437-7464. [mpmccg@ufl.edu](mailto:mpmccg@ufl.edu).

3. NOMINEE:

Program title: "Don't Release Your Pet" Campaign

Program leaders (all FANREP members):

Maia McGuire (see nominator info above);

Steve Johnson, Assistant Professor of Urban Wildlife Ecology, 1200 N Park Rd., Plant City, FL 33563. 813-757-2273. [tadpole@ufl.edu](mailto:tadpole@ufl.edu)

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4. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:

ISSUE: Many Florida residents are not aware that mammals, fish, birds, reptiles and amphibians that they purchase in pet stores are not native to Florida. Many pet owners release their unwanted pets into the wild thinking that they are "doing the right thing" for that pet. The "Don't Release Your Pet" Campaign is designed to educate pet owners that they may actually be doing harm to the environment and the economy by releasing their pet, and to provide them with alternatives to releasing their pets. By educating people to not release their pets, we hope to slow the rate of introduction of non-native animals into Florida's natural environments. This will allow eradication efforts to be more effective and will help protect Florida's native plants and animals from competition with and predation by non-native animals, and possibly prevent new species from becoming established.

TARGET AUDIENCE: Pet owners and pet store staff in Florida

OBJECTIVES:

Short term—Pet owners will become more knowledgeable about the legal and environmental problems associated with releasing pets into Florida's environment.

Pet owners and pet store staff will learn alternatives to releasing unwanted pets. Pet store staff will advise clients about the needs of pets before they are purchased.

Medium-term—Pet owners will pledge (via the online survey) to not release their pet into the wild. Magnets will act as a prompt (as suggested by community-based social marketing research) to remind pet owners about the alternatives to releasing unwanted pets. Potential pet owners will purchase pets that they are able to take care of.

Long-term—The number of pets released into the wild will decrease. A reduction in the number of pet releases will result in protection of Florida's environment and native species.

## EDUCATIONAL METHODS AND MATERIALS:

Three educational products were developed: posters, “postcards” and magnets. These products contain the messages, “Help Protect Florida’s Environment” and “Don’t release your pet,” and the poster and postcard provide a list of alternative ways to deal with unwanted pets.

Extension faculty and agency/organization partners around the state are coordinating the distribution of posters and “postcards” to pet stores, vet clinics and other locations throughout Florida. When materials are taken to pet stores, pet store staff are asked to help the effort by providing “postcards” to customers as well as by educating potential pet purchasers about the housing and feeding requirements of the pet they wish to purchase. Posters and “postcards” are also made available at outreach events including MarineQuest, Water Education Festival, county agricultural fairs and Earth Day events. Printed versions of the surveys are also made available at these outreach events.

The “postcards” contain a web address, which directs visitors to a web-based pet owner survey. This survey assesses pet owners’ knowledge about and attitude towards non-native species and pet/aquarium plant releases. It offers the visitor an opportunity to take a pledge not to release their pet. On completing the survey, if people wish to provide their name and mailing address, we send them one of three magnets, each of which contains an image of a non-native animal known to be causing environmental problems in Florida, along with the statements, “I’m helping protect Florida’s Environment” and “I won’t release pets or aquarium plants into the wild.”

## RESOURCES INVOLVED:

Letters of partnership for this project were obtained from the US Fish & Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and The Nature Conservancy. Grant funds for printing posters and magnets, and for mailing magnets were provided by the University of Florida’s Dean of Extension’s Office and the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. Graphic design assistance was provided by student interns in the Florida Sea Grant Communications Office (Gainesville). The link to the web survey is hosted on Steve Johnson’s UF wildlife website. The web survey was created using SurveyMonkey; a SurveyMonkey subscription was purchased by Maia McGuire using program funds. County extension faculty have volunteered to help coordinate the distribution of the posters and “postcards” in their counties; the Tampa Bay Estuary Program is helping coordinate distribution in the Tampa Bay area. The Florida Aquarium is including the poster in their invasives exhibit.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

Very preliminary data are available. 91 people have completed the online survey, and an additional 139 surveys have been completed at outreach events. The paper copies of the survey have not yet been analyzed. However, the online surveys show that almost 25% of respondents know someone who has released a pet into the wild (mostly dogs, cats, fish, turtles, snakes and birds). All but one of the respondents were willing to pledge not to release pets into the wild. Most people (90%) are aware that it is illegal

to release non-native species into Florida's environment. 94% of people agree that releasing pets can have a harmful effect on Florida's environment, and 85% of people feel that releasing aquarium plants can have a harmful effect.

#### WHY IS THIS PROGRAM INNOVATIVE?

This is a statewide effort, utilizing many partners and extension faculty from many different program areas. It has the potential to prevent the introduction of additional non-native pet species into Florida's natural areas.

#### ROLE OF FANREP MEMBERS

This program has been entirely designed by and is being administered and evaluated by the three FANREP members identified above.