

Help needed to ID invasives

By Carol Winker, carol@cfp.ky

Monday 26th March, 2007 Posted: 16:25 CIT (21:25 GMT)

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Cayman residents are being asked to report sightings of three invasive creatures that may be putting local species at risk.

The invaders are the green iguana, the monk parakeet and the red-eared slider, a type of turtle.

The Department of Environment announced last week that these animals are the focus of a three-month study to determine their potential impact on Cayman's blue iguana, parrot and hickatee.

The invaders may be taking over habitats and/or food supplies, explained DoE director Gina Ebanks-Petrie. There is concern that the locals may soon be outnumbered.

The study began last week with the arrival of three students from the University of Exeter in the UK, who are working in conjunction with DoE staff under the supervision of Senior Research Officer Mat Cottam.



Kristan Godbeer shows fellow students Bethan Parry and Nicola Simpson where he sighted nests of monk parakeets in George Town. Looking over his shoulder is DoE Director Gina Ebanks-Petrie, flanked by Brendan Godley of the University of Exeter, left, and Mat Cottam of DoE. Photo: Carol Winker

Nicola Simpson is investigating the range, diet and behaviour of the green iguana. The greens were first seen along the dyke roads in West Bay, but Mr. Cottam said they have expanded their range south and east. They are now a common sight on golf courses and along roadsides.

Ms Simpson and DoE want to know just how far east they have spread.

The young green iguanas are popular as pets, but they can grow quite large. They lose their emerald green colouration, becoming more grey, sometimes with hints of orange or even blue, Mr. Cottam said. This can lead to confusion with Grand Cayman's critically endangered Blue Iguana.

But the green iguana has definite black stripes on its tail, which the Blue does not.

Bethan Parry is studying the Red-Eared Slider, also called a terrapin. Mr. Cottam said the sliders are also popular pets when they are small, but as they outgrow their accommodations, many are released into the wild.

There is some evidence that they have begun to interbreed with the local hickatee, producing hybrid offspring in freshwater pools around the island.

Kristan Godbeer is examining the monk parakeet populations.

Since Hurricane Ivan in September 2004, local birds have been slow to recover, Mr. Cottam said. The monk parakeets were badly hit by the storm, but the fast-breeding exotics have shown potential for rapid re-establishment. They are possibly out-competing the Grand Cayman parrot for food and natural resources.

The monk parakeet is regarded as a significant agricultural pest in some countries, Mr. Cottam said, but this is the first time they will be studied in detail here.

The students will benefit because they are working on their master's theses. Cayman will benefit because the data they gather will be in a format that is useful locally and will remain here. Their analysis of the data will also be shared.

Their work is actually the start of a major series of new studies into the status of invasive species, Mr. Cottam said.

The studies are part of the Darwin Initiative, a UK government grant scheme to promote biodiversity protection and sustainable resource use in less developed countries.

Cayman's DoE was awarded a grant in 2005 and the University of Exeter is its UK lead partner. Professor Brendan Godley, who spearheaded Cayman's successful application, was on island last week to help the students settle in.

He explained that the university was responsible for their transportation and Cayman is responsible for their accommodations, but the students themselves will pay for their meals and incidentals.

Both the DoE and Department of Agriculture are local partners in the Darwin Initiative.

Other partners include the Humane Society, Bird Club, National Trust, Garden Club, Mosquito Research and Control Unit, Orchid Society, Cayman Wildlife Connection, National Museum, Shade Brigade, Camana Bay Nursery and CaymANNature.

FYI

If you would like to help with the research into monk parakeets, red-eared sliders or green iguanas, and can offer any information on specific sites where they are to be found, please contact the Department of Environment at DoE@gov.ky or phone 949-8469.