

Exotic invaders



- 1 DNA tests have confirmed that three Nile crocodiles have been found living in Florida's swamps. It is not known for certain how they reached the US. "They didn't swim from Africa," said University of Florida herpetologist Kenneth Krysko. One likely possibility was that they were brought in illegally by unlicensed collectors. Owners sometimes fail to keep them secured or set them free on purpose, Mr Krysko told the Associated Press news agency.
- 2 The Nile species can grow to up to 6m (20ft), significantly larger than local alligators, which commonly grow up to 4m. They are known to prey on shrimp, fish, insects, birds and mammals, including humans. They are also known to attack livestock. Florida wildlife experts are concerned that the African species will unbalance the state's ecosystem if they breed in the Everglades wetlands.
- 3 Alien wildlife can severely damage an unprepared ecosystem. The Burmese python was first sighted in the Everglades in the 1980s and there is now an established population of the snake. When the Burmese python turned up far from home in the Florida Everglades it bred fast, sustaining its reproduction by feasting on endangered local wildlife, including alligators. There are now thought to be about 30,000 of the formidable snakes in the area.

- 4 But invading species aren't always large. The Indian Silverleaf – or Sweetpotato – whitefly, even though it is just a millimetre long, is estimated to have seriously damaged crops across California, Texas and Arizona in the 1980s.
- 5 Sometimes the species don't even have to invade, they are invited. Cane toads, native to South and Central America, were introduced to Australia in the 1930s in an attempt to keep the grey-backed cane beetle in check, which was destroying cane crops. But with no natural predator, the poisonous toads spread like wildfire, killing native species as they went.
- 6 And invasive species aren't always obviously menacing either. In 1859, Thomas Austin had 24 ordinary rabbits shipped to Australia for hunting purposes. "The introduction of a few rabbits could do little harm," he reportedly said at the time. But Austin underestimated the habit of rabbits to reproduce like, well, rabbits. Soon there were tens of millions and they killed off local plant species, having a devastating effect on Australia's ecosystem.

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