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The cult origins of one of Florida's most dangerous invasive species

By Craig Pittman
Slate



Florida Dept. of Agriculture / Florida Department of Agriculture

Two Giant African Land Snails are held by a Florida Department of Agriculture worker.

Even as new residents come flooding into Florida every day, so do other things, and by that I mean invasive species. Florida has more invasives than any other state.

We're talking walking catfish, Asian swamp eels, Cuban tree frogs, Argentine tegus – it's quite a motley menagerie. Sometimes I wonder if we've got a little Statue of Liberty at the state line that says, "Give me your slimy, your slippery, your sticky masses, yearning to breed free ... "

Some of Florida's invasives have been here a long time – for instance, the monkeys that live in Silver River State Park, near the Silver Springs tourist attraction. The captain of Silver Springs' Jungle Cruise put them on a small island in the river in the

1930s to spice up the ride for tourists. He thought the monkeys would stay on the island. He didn't realize they could swim. One of them wandered over to the Tampa Bay area to become the celebrated "Mystery Monkey of Tampa Bay."

The island community of Boca Grande has been so plagued by iguanas – voracious little Godzillas that can grow to be 6 feet long from snout to tail – that county commissioners levied a special "iguana tax" to pay for trapping them.

The big name in Florida invasives is, of course, the Burmese python, which has done such a fine job of taking over the Everglades that it has wiped out the rabbits, raccoons, foxes and other small mammals that used to live there. You may have heard we had a big state-sponsored python hunt recently. It didn't put much of a dent in the population.

Not even the alligators can do more than stall the pythons' takeover. So far, the most effective killer of pythons in the Everglades is a 61-year-old great-grandfather with a shotgun. He says he can smell the snakes when they're nearby.

Nearly all of these invasives have a similar origin story – bought by a collector, then escaped or turned loose because it got too big or too nasty. But there's one invasive species in Florida with an origin story that blows the others away.

I'm talking about the giant African land snail, sometimes known as the GALS for short. Yes, that's right, a snail. Not just any snail, though. GALS grow to eight inches long, and their reproductive

potential is stunning.

Each snail contains both female and male reproductive organs, and every mated adult lays about 1,200 eggs each year. As of June 22, state officials say they have captured and killed more than 124,000 of the GALS from around Miami. And the snails are about as destructive as a Looney Tunes Tasmanian devil set on super slow-mo.

How big a pest are they? They will gobble up at least 500 types of plants. They also can cause structural damage to plaster and stucco by chewing on houses. Oh yeah, and they can carry a parasitic nematode that can lead to meningitis in humans.

So you wouldn't want to mess with them, would you? But somebody did, and that's where the story takes a particularly Floridian turn.

Florida authorities believe they were smuggled into Miami by followers of a religious cult based on the traditional African religion Ifa Orisha. One follower flew from Africa to Miami with the snails hidden under her dress, according to police.

Authorities said the cult leader, Charles Stewart, persuaded his followers to drink the snails' mucus as part of a "healing ritual." As a result, one newspaper noted dryly, "several practitioners became violently ill."

Stewart blamed the uproar over the snails on jealousy from Miami's many occult Santeria practitioners.

"What I practice is somewhat different," he said, "and that's what caused the backlash against me."

Craig Pittman covers environmental issues for the Tampa Bay Times. He is the author of "The Scent of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, and the World's Most Beautiful Orchid."