

Catherine Blalack:

The Florida Everglades was once home to an abundance of mammals, birds, and reptiles. Then came the Burmese python, an invasive species that can grow up to 18ft in length and eat every animal in its path.

Mark Madison:

Why is the python a particularly problematic invasive species?

Donna Kalil:

Because it is an apex predator. [laughs] Yeah. And it will take out every animal, that it gets its mouth around. And it has. In Everglades National Park, there are basically no rabbits left. And I grew up down there. When I would go into the Everglades with my family, there were thousands, tens of thousands. You know, you could see hundreds as you're driving down the road. Now, I've been there for seven years on almost a nightly basis, and there are none.

Catherine Blalack:

Now with the Everglades ecosystem on the brink of collapse. The state of Florida has hired professional python hunters in order to save the Glades. Today, we're speaking with Donna Kalil, courageous woman and python huntress, who has wrangled and caught over 700 pythons to date. It's an important conservation mission in one of America's most important ecosystems. This is the Future of Conservation podcast, where we feature thought leaders on the frontlines of protecting wild places and wild things and share their story to inspire us to look at nature in a new way.

I'm your co-host, Catherine Blalack, from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center, located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Mark Madison:

Hello, I'm Mark Madison, the historian for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and we're at the National Conservation Training Center doing our the Future of Conservation podcast. And we have a very special guest with us. We have Donna Kalil, who's here, in starring actually in a new film called, Python Huntress as we host the American Conservation Film Festival here in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Mark Madison:

And because it's March when we're taping this and the title of the film is Python Huntress, let me ask you, were there a lot of women hunting pythons when you first got into the field?

Donna Kalil:

No. [laughs]

Mark Madison:

Were you the first python huntress?

Donna Kalil:

I was I was the first python hunters for the, for this program. Yes. There are biologists, women biologists that that have been progressing the field. But in this program of, the Python elimination program, I was the very first woman. Yes. And since then, I've helped get, several other python huntresses in the program.

Mark Madison:

That's a great way to start for Women's History Month. There you go. So, you're making a little history. So, you describe yourself as a Python elimination specialist? Yeah. Not usually a python hunters. What does a Python elimination specialist do?

Donna Kalil:

Well, okay. So, first of all, the reason I don't use the word huntress, is, when we started, we didn't do that. Our programs didn't want to say that we were hunting because we were hunting in National Parks. You're not allowed to do that, right?

Mark Madison:

Good point. You're in the Everglades National Park.

Donna Kalil:

Right. So, we were surveying and so, we were and basically we're surveying to eliminate, the threat of the basically, apex predator, invasive apex predator, the Burmese python. And, and so, that's why when I came up with, that that's when I came up with the Python elimination specialist. [laughs]

Mark Madison:

I like that, yes. For sure.

Donna Kalil:

There you go.

Mark Madison:

So, we call this podcast The Future of Conservation because we're looking at 21st century conservation challenges, invasive species is certainly a major one. And I think a lot of our listeners think of invasive species as starlings or, various plants and so on that are taking over. Why is the python a particularly problematic invasive species?

Donna Kalil:

Because it is an apex predator. Yeah. And it will take out every animal, that it gets its mouth around. And it has in Everglades National Park, there are basically no rabbits left. And I grew up down there. When I would go into the Everglades with my family, there were thousands, tens of thousands, you know, you could see hundreds as you're driving down the road.

Now, I've been there for seven years on almost a nightly basis, and there are none. I have not seen one in Everglades National Park since, since this started. So.

Mark Madison:

So why don't the pythons starve to death then? If They've eaten all the rabbits.

Donna Kalil:

They've eaten the rabbits, they've eaten the raccoons. They've eaten the possums, they've eaten everything. All the mammals. That's. That's their favorite fare. They're on to birds and alligators. Now, believe it or not, they will eat alligators.

Mark Madison:

Wow.

Donna Kalil:

Yeah. And and, you know, birds migrate down there, so they'll always have a food source. And we still have millions of alligators, so they still have a food source, and they're not starving out, because of that.

And thankfully, the alligators seem to be learning. You know, they're very good moms. And I think that if they've seen a python eat their baby, they're going to like, "no I'm not going to let that one, that next one come by." And so they're starting to eat. And so now it's interesting. It's, you know, two apex

predators fighting amongst themselves and whoever's bigger wins though. And since the Python can get to be 18ft long, they can, they can take out a very large alligator. So that's why we have to step in and help out.

Mark Madison:

Wow.

Donna Kalil:

Yeah.

Mark Madison:

You're seeing real survival of the fittest and action out there.

Donna Kalil:

Absolutely.

Mark Madison:

So you used an evocative phrase, earlier today when we were talking and that you're a hunter hunting a hunter.

Donna Kalil:

Yes.

Mark Madison:

So how do you actually capture the pythons?

Donna Kalil:

I do capture them by hand. We basically, travel- my my favorite mode of of, catching pythons is via vehicle, my truck mainly, and I have a python perch up on top, and, I have volunteers that that are up top there are searching. I'm searching as I'm driving, trying to stay safe, but, driving along and, and we're looking for them to come out and, that's when we catch them, you know, that's when we- when once you see them, you catch them.

You can't catch them if you can't see them. So we're just driving along waiting to, to come across one hunting. And, I say that's why I say we're hunting the hunters. They're out hunting and we're hunting them. And then once we once we get to them, park the car, go down there really nice, slow, quiet from

behind, try not to make shadows and grab them right behind the head. And then you wrestle with them. Depending on the size. You you you know, you have to wrestle a lot or just a little if they're small. But, you know, the largest I've caught was 16 feet. And thankfully, I had two volunteers with me to help because that's they're, they're all muscle. They're, you know, all muscle. So it's it's a fight.

Mark Madison:

And then you euthanize them.

Donna Kalil:

And then I have to euthanize them.

Mark Madison:

Because they're an invasive and they're causing problems. Why wouldn't you just kill them right in the field, like, cut their heads off?

Donna Kalil:

Well, yeah. Cutting their heads off is the worst way. Because ,because they're a reptile, they can actually stay cognitive. They're, they're, they're, they're aware of what's happening for almost an hour. All right. So that's cruel. And there are there are definitely laws against that. So yeah, we have to do, you know, very quickly, have them lose consciousness and no pain.

So that's, you know, that that's the hardest part of the job, really. But, but it has to be done, you know, it's, it's one Python or it's, you know, several hundred animals that it would eat within its life, within its lifespan. So that's the choice that we have to make. It's a, it's a hard choice, but it has to be made.

Mark Madison:

Last question. But it it's a very hard job. There's all sorts of hard aspects from staying up all night and trying to spot a well camouflaged python to wrestling a 16ft python to, to euthanizing. Yes, which is very sad. I'm sure there's other more lucrative careers with better hours. So why do you do it?

Donna Kalil:

Yeah, you can make more money working at McDonald's. [laughs] Unfortunately

Mark Madison:

I suspected. So. What? What motivates you?

Donna Kalil:

Yeah, it's definitely not the money. It's you know, I've always been an environmentalist. I've always wanted to try to help save the environment. And, you know, I find that this is. This is what I'm doing one, one python at a time, making a difference and trying to teach the next generation. You've got to get involved.

Don't give up hope. You know, I know the world is falling around it seems like it's falling around. You know, falling apart around us. But, But every single one of us can make a positive difference. You just have to get up and do it, you know? You know, find your cause and, and go for it.

Mark Madison:

Thank you. Donna, we've been speaking with Donna Kalil. She is a python elimination specialist in the Everglades National Park. And she's also, the star of a new film here at the American Conservation Film Festival called Python Huntress. Thank you very much.

Donna Kalil:

Thank you for having me.

Mark Madison:

That was great. [laughs]

Catherine Blalack:

Pythons are out of control in the Florida Everglades by way of an intentional or accidental release. One such popular pet snake species, the Burmese python, was introduced in South Florida. They have established a breeding population and are now considered to be one of the most concerning invasive species in the Everglades National Park. This non-native apex predator has wiped out rabbit, raccoon, possum populations and has been known to take out anything it can get its mouth around, including whitetail deer and even alligators.

There are big dangers in releasing exotic species, which can cause billions of dollars worth of problems. The Burmese python is, quote, "one of the greatest threats to restoration success in the Everglades." I like how Donna said we have to step in to help out. This is a great example of a conservation reliant issue where courageous souls like Donna need to take action wrestle and lethally remove Burmese pythons in order to protect the Everglades and its vulnerable native species.

Only the Everglades combines a subtropical climate, numerous distinct habitat types, and an extraordinary array of species in such a diverse yet vulnerable ecosystem. It's a biodiversity hotspot and a national treasure in need of protecting. You can be involved in prevention in various ways. Please keep your pets secure and do not release them under any circumstances. Animals like exotic snakes or fish can wreak havoc on native wildlife and habitat when they're when they escape or they're released.

If you must surrender a pet because you can no longer care for it, do so responsibly. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to collectively address the threat of invasive species. I hope each of you can find a cause. For Donna, it's one python at a time. What will you do to get involved? Thank you to our listeners and a special thank you to our guest, Donna Kalil, for the bravery and dedication to her work.

To continue listening to the future of conservation, check us out on Apple Podcasts and other podcast apps. If you know of interesting people or have ideas for a future episode, contact Catherine Blalack at catherine_blalack@fws.gov. See you next time.