

Canary Islanders fight to control invasion by California kingsnakes

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.07.14

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An albino California kingsnake. Photo: Nathan Rupert/Flickr

The Canary Islands used to be a stable ecosystem. The islands are just off the coast of northwestern Africa. The animal species living there were balanced. But then, the California kingsnake arrived and grew in numbers. Now, the reptiles are killing off the islands' own birds, mammals and lizards.

The native animals are being killed because they have had no time to develop ways of avoiding the snakes.

The kingsnake population has exploded, say U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) biologists. The reason is there are no local animals that prey on the snakes. The biologists are helping the Canary Islands attempt to control the snakes. But the snakes are very secretive and can change with their surroundings.

"The kingsnakes in question are from a species found in San Diego," said Robert Fisher. He is a biologist with the USGS. Some of the snakes were sold as pets in the Canary Islands. Then they got loose, he said.

"Going Through The Roof"

Now the population of snakes is "going through the roof," he said.

Fisher is among three U.S. experts heading to the Canary Islands in May. They will advise scientists and government officials on the behavior of the snakes. They will also point out the possible weaknesses of the snakes.

People were first worried about the snakes in 2007. Since then, the number of kingsnakes has grown enormously. There are now thousands per square mile in the eastern and northwestern parts of the island of Gran Canaria. The island has become a place of safety for the kingsnakes. They like the mild weather, moist ocean air and land full of animals that never learned to fear snakes.

Dogs and hawks have been used against the snakes. So far, fewer than 2,000 have been captured. Most of those were discovered slithering over the ground.

Slithering Underground

"The trouble is, these snakes spend much of their lives beneath the ground," said Robert Reed. He is an expert on invasive species with the USGS. That means there are "many, many thousands more out there you can't see."

Brian Hinds is president of a group that studies snakes and other reptiles. He is going to Gran Canaria. Hinds has plans for dealing with what he described as a "monumental task." Among them: plowing up infested areas with construction machines.

"They need to strike back hard and fast," said Hinds, who says he has personally captured more than 3,000 California kingsnakes. "They're not called kingsnakes for nothing."

The Canary Islands are another example of what can happen when an invasive snake gets into an otherwise balanced ecosystem, or biological community. Brown tree snakes have settled in the Pacific island of Guam. The Florida Everglades have been invaded by Burmese pythons. The wolf snake was introduced to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius.

Feasting On Local Animals

The California kingsnake is known as *Lampropeltis getula californiae*. The snakes in the Canary Islands are nearly one third larger than wild kingsnakes living in Southern California.

"They'll be eating any lizard they can fit in their mouths," Reed said.

Canary Island biologists fear that the snakes may be nibbling three native species to death. They think the gecko, skink and giant lizard could be wiped out by the kingsnakes.

A 2012 study funded by the European Union said it was likely the kingsnake could spread to the other islands. The snake could wipe out local reptiles, the report said. Canary Island officials hope to eventually reduce their numbers by half, if possible.

Reed said the problem with invasive species is likely to get worse. It will happen more often as people have more money and get interested in owning unusual pets, he said.

Quiz

- 1 Why do the Canary Islands no longer have a stable ecosystem?
 - (A) They have mild weather.
 - (B) The islands are full of reptiles.
 - (C) California kingsnakes are eating away the native species.
 - (D) There is an increase in the number of wolf snakes and brown tree snakes.

- 2 Which of the following about California kingsnakes is NOT TRUE?
 - (A) Their number on the Canary Islands has grown to a great extent.
 - (B) They are one-third smaller than the snakes found in Southern California.
 - (C) They like the moist ocean air on the Canary Islands.
 - (D) They mostly live beneath the ground.

- 3 What is the similarity between California kingsnakes and Burmese pythons?
 - (A) they have established themselves in their respective areas
 - (B) they like mild weather to reproduce
 - (C) they mostly feed on geckos and skinks
 - (D) they mostly feed on lizards

- 4 Select the paragraph from the last part of the article that discusses the problem with people preferring uncommon pets.

Answer Key

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Paragraph 16:

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