



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

Empowering and preparing Cayman's Sister Islands to tackle invasive mammals



2024-2027



Department of Environment
Cayman Islands Government



January 2026

Note: On the 3rd of November 2022, the National Conservation (Alien Species) Regulations, 2022 were published in the Cayman Islands Gazette.

These important regulations will help protect our endemic and native plants and animals from the potential negative impacts of alien species.

For more information, FAQs relating to the Alien Species Regulations and to learn more about the threats of invasive species in the Cayman Islands, please visit:

- <https://conservation.ky/invasivespecies-faq/>
- <https://conservation.ky/alien-species/>
- <https://doe.ky/terrestrial/invasive-species/>

What is Darwin Plus / How is the project funded?

Darwin Plus is a UK government grants scheme that funds projects aiming to protect the unique biodiversity and improving resilience to climate change within the UK Overseas Territories

Darwin Plus, also known as the Overseas Territories Environment and Climate Fund, provides funding for environmental projects in UK Overseas Territories and fellowships for UK Overseas Territories Nationals to increase their knowledge and ability to meet long-term strategic beneficial outcomes for the natural environment in UK Overseas Territories.

- Darwin Plus: <https://darwinplus.org.uk/about-us/>

What is the primary objective of this Darwin Plus project?

The future of the unique native biodiversity of Cayman's Sister Islands, including the Critically Endangered Sister Islands Rock Iguana (SIRI), is seriously threatened by invasive non-native mammals, especially feral and domestic cats. This project will ensure that local agencies and the Sister Islands' communities are prepared to collaboratively deliver **long-term strategies** to sustainably protect native biodiversity by enhancing **responsible pet management**, developing a **humane feral cat eradication** plan, and increasing on-island capacity to implement **enhanced biosecurity** and **invasive mammal suppression** long-term.

Who is involved in the project?

The project is a partnership between the Cayman Islands Department of Environment (DoE), the National Trust for the Cayman Islands (NTCI), and is led by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

To find out more about the project partners, please visit the links below:

- DoE: www.doe.ky/about-us/about-us
- NTCI: www.nationaltrust.org.ky/about-us/what-is-the-national-trust/
- RSPB: www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-RSPB

How long does the project run for, and what is the cost?

The project started in April 2024 and will run to March 2027 and is fully funded by Darwin Plus with the support of the project partners for a total amount of £599,303.

- <https://darwinplusorg.uk/project/DPLUS207>

What native species does the project focus on protecting?

Tackling invasive species can help protect all our native and endemic species, but a major focus of this project is the **Sister Islands Rock Iguana (SIRI)**. This species is endemic to the Sister Islands (i.e., found nowhere else in the world), with the most significant population on Little Cayman.

In addition to the SIRIs, this project will help support our **nesting seabirds**, such as the **Brown Boobies** on Cayman Brac, and **Red-footed Boobies** and **Magnificent Frigatebirds** on Little Cayman. Cryptic species such as the **Little Cayman Galliwasp** and the **Little Cayman Dwarf Boas**, as well as elusive species such as the **Curly-tailed Lizards** and **anoles**, are also expected to benefit from the project. Residents have reported an increase in sightings of many **ground-nesting birds** such as **Antillean Nighthawks**, **West Indian Whistling Ducks** and **Black-Necked Stilts**.

How are invasive species introduced to the Sister Islands?

- **Accidental import** - which means stowaways on boats, shipping containers, in person, on aircraft, food and household items, plants and so on. This can occur internationally and from Grand Cayman.
- **Intentional Illegal import** - (i.e. smuggling) via boats or suitcase luggage.
- **Pet trades, irresponsible pet ownership, and plant imports** - some animals and plants are legally imported into the Cayman Islands and then intentionally or inadvertently released into the wild.

What invasive species does this project focus on?

Feral cats are members of the domestic cat species (*Felis catus*) that do not have a person responsible for their care and exist with little to no dependency on humans. They prey upon native species, in particular juvenile and hatchling SIRI, other reptiles and bird chicks. SIRIs were the largest land animal before humans arrived. They evolved without mammalian predator pressure. Young SIRIs are left vulnerable to predation as they do not have natural self-preservation instincts or defences against cats.

The Cayman Islands' resident colonies of breeding seabirds are also at risk. Seabirds are in decline globally, in part, due to invasive mammal predation at nesting sites when the birds are particularly vulnerable. In Cayman Brac, the Brown Boobies are ground nesters, and in Little Cayman, the Magnificent Frigatebirds and Red-footed Boobies nest in low-lying mangroves, leaving them exposed. Feral cats also predate other wildlife in Cayman, including snakes, anoles, Curly-tailed Lizards, bats, and small birds.

Local studies show that the health status of feral cats is very poor. They suffer from parasites, show symptoms of disease(s), and have poor body conditions. Simply releasing cats in a trap-neuter-release programme does not provide the individual cat with a healthy quality of life (ASPCA, 2015).

More information on feral cats can be found in the DoE Feral Cat FAQ and Wildlife Impacts and Health of Cats in the Cayman Islands report. Both can be found below:

- <https://doe.ky/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Feral-Cat-FAQ.pdf>
- <https://conservation.ky/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/DoE-Report-2023-Wildlife-impacts-and-Health-of-Cats-Felis-Catus-in-the-Cayman-Islands.pdf>
- <https://doe.ky/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Feral-Cat-Necropsy-Report-2024-v4-FINAL.pdf>

Rodents are known to prey on eggs and can destroy native habitats. They will even prey on live hatchlings of many species, such as reptiles and birds. Rodent populations increase and decrease naturally with water and food availability, which indicates that cats are not an effective method for population management of the invasive rodent population. Although this finding may seem counterintuitive, it is supported by other research done around the world. Rodents are a threat to native wildlife, especially fledgling birds, eggs, and plants and they need to be managed through a targeted population control program to be successful.

- <https://doe.ky/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-Update-Rodent-Index-in-Little-Cayman-Report-Final.pdf>
- <https://doe.ky/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Brown-Booby-Predator-Control-Report-2023.pdf>

Cats have been here for hundreds of years. Why are they still considered an invasive species?

An invasive species is an organism that is alien to the ecosystem in question in which that species causes negative changes in the new environment, whether economically, environmentally, or as it relates to health. This is different to native species, which normally live and thrive in a particular ecosystem having evolved there naturally and without human involvement.

When a species is introduced into an ecosystem outside of its normal range, the natural balance of the recipient ecosystem may be disrupted. The introduced species can outcompete native species and take on a role which is not accommodated in that ecosystem. This results in negative effects on the normal functions of that ecosystem, and the species reaches invasive status. We see direct evidence of feral cats following this trend, as well as pet cats that are left to roam.

The fact is that this innate predatory behaviour of cats has contributed to the extinction of 63 species worldwide and are responsible for at least 14% of bird, mammal, and reptile extinctions on islands (Medina et al., 2011; Doherty et al. 2016). They continue to threaten other species already classed as critically endangered.

- Invasive species in the Cayman Islands: <https://doe.ky/terrestrial/invasive-species/>

Why don't we just leave the cats alone and let "nature do its thing" if there are also other invasive species that prey on native wildlife?

From climate change and habitat destruction to pollution and a host of other factors, the resilience of the Cayman Islands native species has dramatically declined. A diverse mix of habitats, flora, and fauna allows populations to remain stable and withstand pressures. In the case of feral cats, we are already seeing declines in native fauna, such as the Sister Islands Rock Iguana (SIRI). We are now at a tipping point, and we risk witnessing the extinction of endemic species within our lifetime if no action is taken.

It is important to remember that cats were brought to the Cayman Islands by humans, and it is our responsibility to control this major predator to safeguard our native wildlife.

How is the project controlling feral cats and rodents?

Since June 2022, the Cayman Islands Department of Environment has been trapping feral cats and rats in areas that are environmentally sensitive, e.g., around Brown Booby nests. Cats are trapped in simple cages that do not harm them. The cages are regularly checked when set, and the cats are scanned for microchips. Any microchipped pet cats are returned to their owners unharmed the same day. Feral cats are humanely euthanised under methods approved by the National Conservation Council (NCC).

- NCC meeting agendas and minutes: <https://conservation.ky/general%20meetings/>
- NCC meetings are streamed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@CaymanIslandsDOE>

What will happen if my pet is trapped?

If pet cats are trapped in cages and identified, they will be returned to their owners unharmed.

To help avoid your pet being mistaken as a feral animal, it is highly advised to microchip your pet and mark it with identification, like a collar and tag. Microchipping helps identify you as the owner of your pet so that it can be returned to you. As its owner, you are responsible for your pet's health and for the control of its movements. If an animal is found roaming off its owner's property regularly, it can be considered feral even if microchipped. So please ensure you are fully responsible for your pet's health and its whereabouts to protect it and our native species.

Will controlling feral cats increase the number of rats?

Studies have shown that rodent populations generally follow a cyclical trend, independent of cat predation. Their growth is typically driven by the availability of food, shelter and environmental factors which increase the number of young they can raise, rather than being driven by the abundance of predators in their environment.

Cats will certainly kill some rodents but are very unlikely to have much effect on rat numbers overall. Put simply, rats have many offspring, adjusting their reproductive cycles based on resource availability. They are able to persist even in low numbers and multiply under varying conditions. It would likely take a combination of a significant increase in predation beyond feral cats, a disease outbreak, and a serious lack of food, to reduce the overall rat population on any of the Cayman Islands.

Feral cats are generalist, opportunistic predators that hunt any wildlife possible. Studies have shown that when there is an easier food source available, feral cats will typically opt for those. In Cayman, this means that our native birds and iguanas are all too often the target of cats. Typically, birds and the native Sister Island Rock Iguana have relatively few offspring, meaning that the loss of small numbers of individuals can have a big impact on their overall populations.

That said, the concerns of the community are extremely important in meeting the goals of this project. As rodents become bolder, residents may see rodents in places they haven't before. Therefore, there is an ongoing rodent control programmes in both Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. To report an increase in rodent activity, contact the Department of Environmental Health (DEH).

The DEH has some very informative guidance on preventative measures that community members can take to lower the likelihood of rodents occurring in and around residential areas. The first – and most effective – thing we can all do to reduce the number of rats that our surroundings can support is to clear up food waste and cover garbage receptacles securely.

- <https://doe.ky/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Critical-Assessment-of-Feral-Cats-and-Strategies-in-the-Cayman-Islands.pdf>
- <https://doe.ky/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-Update-Rodent-Index-in-Little-Cayman-Report-Final.pdf>
- <https://gov.ky/documents/35692/0/deh-rodent-control.pdf/ccb1ced9-98b7-8a5f-40f6-3e3a6810ef38?t=1764700731182>

Why is feeding feral cats so bad?

Feeding feral cats strengthens their populations with energy to hunt and breed in an ecosystem that did not evolve to support them. Small island ecosystems and the native species which they support are particularly vulnerable to explosions of feral animals with no top-down predator control to balance the ecosystem.

Feral cats instinctively hunt even when fed. A study of a “colony” of cats supplied daily with food revealed that 83% of these cats hunted wildlife (Hernandez et al., 2018), concluding that supplemental feeding of feral cats does not inhibit or even significantly reduce predation behaviours.

Official guidelines for TNR (trap, neuter, release) programmes state that “colonies” should **not** be established around ecologically sensitive areas (American Veterinary Medical Association, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association). The Australian Veterinary Association does not condone TNR programmes, and in some areas, od Australia it is illegal to release and feed feral cats due to the vulnerability of wildlife (Australian Government Department of Environment, 2015). Given the vulnerability of the Cayman Islands' ecosystems, the islands' small sizes, high rates of endemism and no natural predators, it is clear that “managed colonies” of feral cats should not be entertained, given best practice rules of many authoritative and advisory bodies.

Due to the innate hunting behaviour of cats, predation behaviour cannot be prevented by feeding or loving care, and so the inevitable killing, injury and disturbance of irreplaceable, native wildlife should be part of the ethical debate, but unfortunately rarely is.

What about pets – do they impact native species too?

Feral animals are free-roaming animals without owners, often having a low quality of life, and do not live in the conditions we would allow for our own pets. DoE's study found that animals without a home or owners to care for them are subject to a range of diseases and injuries that greatly reduce their quality of life and welfare.

Domestic animals (e.g., pets), on the other hand, are defined as animals that are not wild and are kept as pets or to produce food. However, domestic pets can still contribute to native species' decline if not cared for responsibly and allowed to roam free outdoors. They can also breed with feral populations and produce unwanted kittens/puppies that increase the populations of feral cats/dogs that attack and kill native species or unfortunately become roadkill. For animals to be considered as pets, then under the law they must be contained to the owner's property.

Responsible pet ownership is at the heart of this issue and the key to resolving the long-term problem. You can help by ensuring that pets are:

- **Spayed/Neutered**
- Seen for **Regular Vet Visits** for vaccinations and medications
- **Microchipped & Collared**

Restricting the uninhibited movement of pets is important, too. Ensure your pets remain within your property or, when you are out and about (e.g. on a walk), your pets remain on a lead and under control. Please stick to designated trails to avoid disturbing native wildlife. These measures work to reduce the risk of increasing the feral populations, keep pets from negatively impacting native species, and protect the health and safety of our own pets.

- Please see a resource published by the Department of Agriculture on responsible dog ownership and dog licensing <https://doa.gov.ky/responsible-dog-ownership-dog-license/>.

Pet cats are not the targets of any control operations on the Sister Islands. If you're concerned about the well-being of your pet during operations and would like further advice or to be notified of control activities, please contact DoE at 1.345.925.7625 or the National Trust at 1.345.923.8072 (Little Cayman) or 1.345.936.1388 (Cayman Brac).

Is it reasonable to expect people to now control the movement of their outdoor pet cats?

Yes.

Any fundamental behaviour change will encounter initial resistance and require a period of adjustment. If people care about their pets and have committed to being responsible pet owners, then they should be motivated to act in the best interest of their pets by keeping them safe.

- The Alien species regulations can be read about following this link, <https://conservation.ky/alien-species/>

How do I register my pet cat with the DoE?

This question applies to those living in the Sister Islands.

If you are the identifiable owner of a cat(s) and you are providing food, shelter, veterinary care and controlling their movement, then they can be considered pet cats under the definitions contained in the DoE's regulations.

If you would like to adopt a colony cat(s) or feral cat(s), they can eventually meet the definition of a pet cat through dedicated care and resocialization.

- Take them to the vet and have them **spayed/neutered**
- **Ensure that they remain on your property** (i.e. you can maintain control of their movements either in an enclosed yard with rollers, patio/catio, or inside your house). *This means that they may not roam freely outside of your property at any time of the day or night.*

If you have to set a trap for an outdoor cat to take it to the vet, then it is unlikely that you are in control of its movement. If you do not have a way to control the movement of your cats, then they do not meet the definition of pet cats. It is not enough to assume that your cats stay on your property/porch because you see them there some of the time.

- To register your pet cat (Sister Islands), contact the DoE at: DOE@gov.ky
- To register your dog with the Department of Agriculture (DoA) (all islands), complete this form: <https://doa.gov.ky/service/animal-welfare-and-control-services/#dog-license-registration>
- Information regarding the importation of cats and dogs into the Cayman Islands can be reviewed at: <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/media/document/6435/file>

Is there a maximum number of cats I am allowed to own before they no longer meet the definition of a pet?

There is no legislated maximum number of cats that an individual may own if they continue to meet the definitions of a pet cat and they are being taken care of responsibly. However, it is important to understand that for their comfort, each pet cat should have its own private litter tray or waste area, food & water bowls, and approximately a minimum of 18-20 square feet per cat.

What is Biosecurity and why is it important?

Biosecurity is the management and physical measures designed to reduce the risk of introduction, establishment and spread of alien species of plants or animals, animal or plant diseases, infections, or infestations, from and within an animal or plant population. This project focuses particularly on alien mammal species.

Biosecurity is important because, in practice, it can prevent, reduce, and eliminate the introduction of invasive species and the spread of disease to our native species, which are inherently at risk of extinction in small island locations.

Biosecurity is everyone's responsibility. This project will assess the current biosecurity risks and support Sister Islands residents and stakeholders to improve biosecurity on the Sister Islands. If you'd like to find out more about how you can help improve biosecurity, get in touch with Alex Flores on Cayman Brac at sisterislands@nationaltrust.org.ky and Tamara Doyle on Little Cayman at biosecurity@nationaltrust.org.ky.

How can I get involved with the project?

Community support is important for the prevention and management of invasive species:

- Familiarise yourself with the Alien Species Regulations: <https://conservation.ky/alien-species/>
- Familiarise yourself with Prohibited Species List: <https://conservation.ky/prohibited-species/>
- **Be a responsible pet owner** - Do not let your pet roam free and unsupervised as they can hurt other animals while also being at risk of danger from traffic and disease
- **Do not feed or enable feral animals**
- Give unwanted animals to DoA or the humane society, rather than releasing them into the wild
- Dispose of your trash responsibly – litter and trash piles can encourage and support invasive species such as rats

- Clean your boots before you hike in a new area, especially after coming back from vacation, to avoid spreading the seeds of invasive plants
- When travelling by air or boat between the islands, make sure there are no stowaways on you, your vessel, or your luggage
- Do not bring vacation souvenirs such as animals, plants, shells, seeds, soil, rocks, or untreated food that can carry pests that you might not see with the naked eye. Seeds, pests, or other organisms can hide and quickly spread over the island without you being aware of it.
- Do not introduce any exotic animals or plants into the country without first contacting the DoA and filing the appropriate paperwork
- Report to the DoE and DoA if you see any invasives or suspicious animals, plants, or agricultural pests

There are several ways that volunteers can support this project:

- **Biosecurity volunteers** – we look to train individuals on the islands to focus on biosecurity and support efforts to improve measures, as well as share their knowledge with family and friends.
- **Seabird surveys** (Brown Booby bird) rely on volunteers on Cayman Brac, and people can contact DoE Jane Haakonsson (Research Officer, Terrestrial Resources Unit) directly at jane.haakonsson@gov.ky if interested.

What if I want to report an invasive species that isn't a feral cat or rat? Who can I contact?

If you've seen a Green Iguana, or even if you're not sure what it is, then please contact:

Cayman Brac

DoE Alien Species Officer – Nick Ebanks (324.6030)

National Trust Community Engagement Officer – Alex Flores (936.1388)

Little Cayman

DoE Conservation Officer – Ronnie Dougall (916.5849)

Green Iguana B'Gonna Coordinator – Tamara Doyle (923.8072)

Relevant contact:

Department of Environmental Health

Sister Islands: (345) 948-2321

Email: dehcustomerservice@gov.ky

Rodent control support website: <https://doe.ky/terrestrial/rat-tips/>