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# FAU biologist works to show saving vervets is not just monkey business

By **SCOTT LUXOR**

SUN SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT | JUL 16, 2021





Deborah “Missy” Williams, an adjunct professor at Florida Atlantic University, created a nonprofit in 2018 called the Dania Beach Vervet Project. Her goal is to promote protection, education and conservation of the monkeys. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Now that the mystery of how the [vervet monkeys ended up in Dania Beach](#) is solved, the future of the playful primates is still up in the air.

Deborah “Missy” Williams, an adjunct professor at Florida Atlantic University, is on a mission to purchase land next to its adhoc habitat in Dania Beach to create a sanctuary for them. Williams acknowledges that the primates were imported for biomedical testing decades ago and are considered a non-native species, but she said she feels that now they have a generational right to be treated as a part of the local ecology.

Her concern for the vervets led her to create a nonprofit in 2018 called the [Dania Beach Vervet Project](#). Her goal is to promote the protection, education and conservation of the monkeys.

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“I started studying vervet monkeys in 2014 for my Ph.D. dissertation at FAU,” Williams said. “A couple of years into it, I realized there really wasn’t like a localized organization or voice for them. Everybody loved the monkeys, but there wasn’t a central place to go to. So I felt like a nonprofit would be a good way for people to network supporters.”

Williams has been concerned that the community of primates is being neglected and that they could be eliminated because of categorizing them a certain way.

“I became really concerned for their long-term future as well as their welfare,” she said. “I know that they’re non-native, and I know that typically the state of Florida doesn’t make a lot of allowances for them. The only options typically are euthanasia for the animals, or they simply remove them.”



Deborah "Missy" Williams (Scott Luxor / Contributor)



Deborah "Missy" Williams is shown entering the woods where the vervets currently live. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Part of the environmental concern for the government with non-native species is that they could become invasive the way that they could become damaging to the local ecology.

"I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all protocol for all non-native populations," Williams said. "They're not really checking off all the boxes of being an invasive species. They haven't reached that level and I don't think they ever will.

"Because they're non-native species, we weren't allowed to treat the monkeys for accidental electrocution, limb loss, broken bones or anything else," she said. "The animals have to suffer and either die out in the wild painfully or hopefully recover on their own. Florida Fish and Wildlife basically said that we would need a permit to trap animals and have the animal in possession. But then you can't release it, once you have that animal under your control. Unfortunately, there are limited options for them."



Deborah Williams has the goal to promote the protection, education and conservation of the monkeys. (Scott Luxor/Contributor/Contributor)

## **Both science and love**

Her concern for the monkeys is partly based on the biological needs of the primates as well as a personal affection she has for them based on her regular visits to their habitat in Dania Beach.

“You get attached to them because you see their personalities,” she said. “I just want them to be cared for as individuals. That’s really been my driving force behind the project. I wanted to see if there’s a way to preserve and protect this population the best that I can.”



A vervet monkey is spotted in its Dania Beach habitat. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

And it's not just Williams who has become connected to the Dania Beach vervets.

“A lot of local community members love the monkeys, and a lot of businesses love them as well,” she said. “So the Dania Beach Vervet Project has become a central hub for people to reach out to me as well as for me to gauge the public’s opinion about what they want to see for the monkeys.”

## **A home of their own**

Williams decided that she was going to try to find a plot of land to call their own. That way they could have their own habitat and they could eventually be helped by humans for their medical needs.

“The state wasn’t budging on the law changes that were needed and they weren’t really flexible with any of my requests,” she said. “That’s why I decided that I

should push to buy land to create a large sanctuary. Once I have that, I can get working on getting medical treatments for them.”

Originally, the sanctuary Williams had in mind would be over 12 acres of mangrove property where they already are.

“I was thinking that this would be great. I wouldn’t have to move them. But the county said I couldn’t do that. The land where they are is a conservation easement and I can’t do anything about it,” she said.

But the vervet advocate found another possible solution for them. And it was right next door.



Deborah Williams wants to acquire the land in this photo, to the right of the trail leading into the vervet monkey woods. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Coincidentally, there is a 3 1/2-acre strip of land right next to the conservation easement land where they are now,” she said. “The county said they don’t care what I put on that.”

That bit of good news led Williams to reach out to find out how she could get the land for the vervet community.

“It’s an undeveloped parcel that happens to belong to the rental car company Hertz,” she said. “So I emailed the CEO and he forwarded it to one of his executives in charge of real estate. That person said that they want to help out any way they can, but their hands were tied because they’re going through bankruptcy.

“They have been very nice about it,” she said. “They’re hoping to make this work by the end of this year when they’re out of bankruptcy status.”

If that situation works out, Williams will either be able to lease or buy the land.

## Keeping up with the vervets

Williams makes it clear that anyone who observes the monkeys on a regular basis will become attached and want to do something to help them. She and her students from FAU who also study the vervets even have names for them.

“You know how you just look at somebody and you can tell that’s a Fred or that’s a Bob?” she said. “That’s what we do with the monkeys. We all stand around looking at each new one and figure out a name. So they all have names and we track them and keep photos of them in a database.”



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Williams also said she wants to reassure residents that there’s nothing to worry about with them.

“I go out to visit the monkeys every day,” she said. “I really enjoy it. People ask me if I’m worried about the monkeys, but I’ve had zero issues with them. I’ve encountered people in the neighboring parking lot as well as people walking down



A camera keeps an eye on the habitat so that the monkeys can be observed even when people aren't around. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

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the street who have actually caused more worries for me than the vervets.”

By bringing students with her to study the vervet community whenever possible, she is able to keep an ongoing watch over her favorite primates.

“I have students come in from FAU to record the monkeys’ behavior because we’ve been using it as a local research site,” she said. “Whenever I go there, the vervets see me and sometimes my students. I usually take a headcount, I check for wounds, I check for new babies and basically keep track of the population.”



Biologist Deborah Williams visits the monkeys every day. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“The vervets are there, they see me come in and they figure that it’s that lady again who keeps showing up. They just keep going on about their monkey business, so it’s been great.”

*To donate to the Dania Beach Vervet Project, visit [bit.ly/2UU9frx](https://bit.ly/2UU9frx). The goal is to raise \$25,000 with a donor pledging to match up to \$5,000 in donations.*

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