

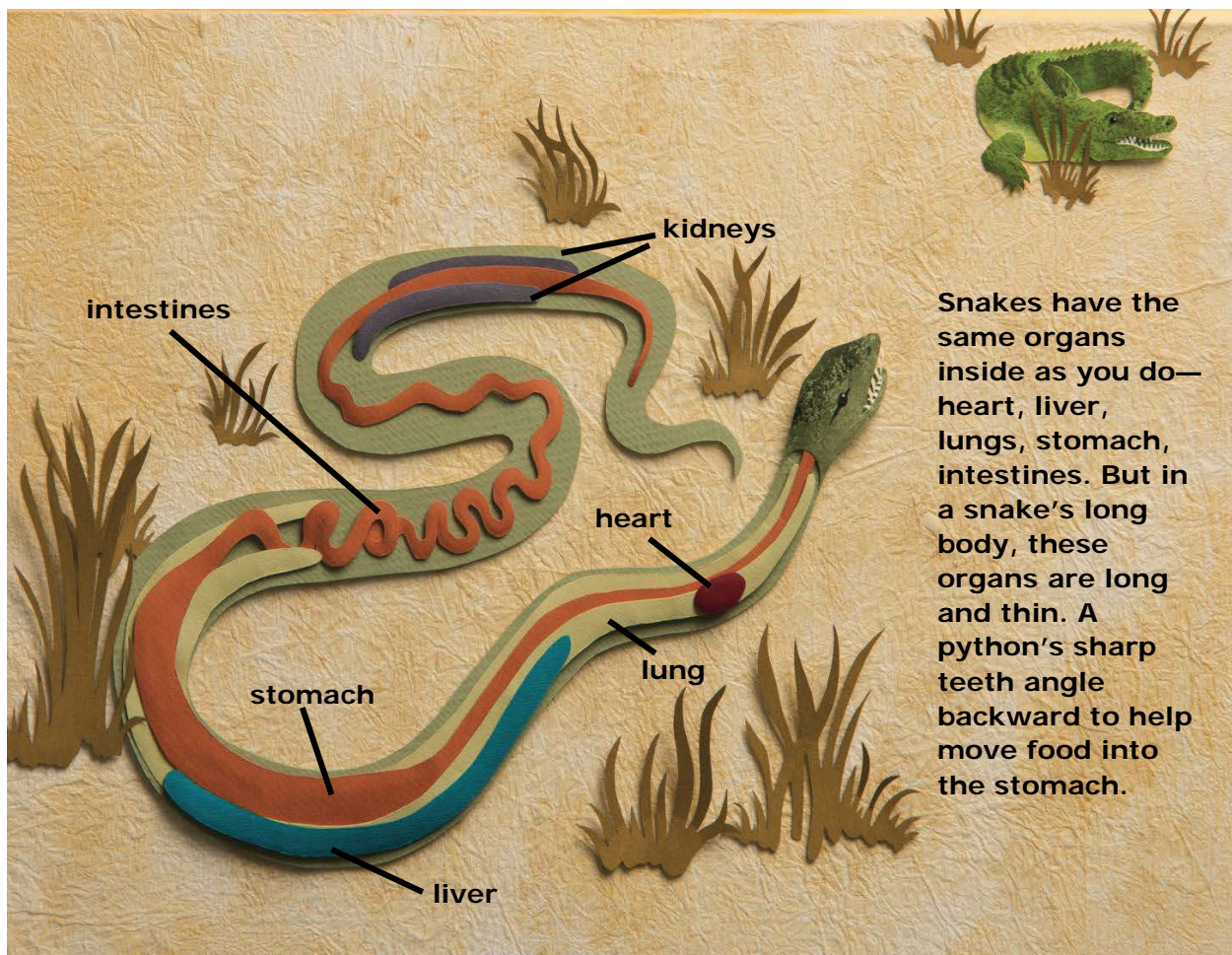
How to Swallow a Crocodile

by Nicole Gill

For extreme eating, snakes may take the prize!

Do you know that feeling you get when you've eaten a huge meal? You probably need to lie down for a minute or two! Now imagine how you'd feel if that meal weighed as much as you do (or more). There's no way you could eat something that big. But pythons regularly do.

Snakes are creatures of extremes. Most of the time, when they're not hunting, they're pretty lazy. Snakes are cold-blooded, so they don't need to use energy to heat their bodies. A snake resting in the warm sun can slow down its breathing and heartbeat so it uses almost no energy at all. That means that snakes don't need to eat very often. A large snake like a python may eat only a few times a year. One big meal gives it enough energy to last many months. This trick helps snakes survive in places where food is scarce. And it keeps them safe. The less often they have to go out to hunt, the less risk they run of being eaten themselves. But when it's time for a meal, pythons get energized, bringing on a burst of speed to catch unwary creatures.



After a python catches and kills its prey, such as a careless crocodile, it faces its first eating challenge: how to swallow it.



A python coils itself around its victim and squeezes until the prey's heart stops.

Pythons are big snakes. Some can reach 30 feet (10 m) long and weigh 200 pounds. But with no hands and small teeth, they can't tear apart their food. Instead, they stretch their jaws wide and slowly swallow their dinners whole.



Snakes have evolved flexible jaws to swallow large prey. A python's lower jaw is connected by a stretchy tendon at the bottom. This allows the python to open its mouth extremely wide.

Powerful muscles move the meal along. And inside, the python's entire body changes. Breaking down a crocodile is hard work! The python's heart and liver nearly double in size. Body-building cells multiply like crazy. The stomach and pancreas pour out digestive juices.

In fact, when a python is digesting, it burns 20 to 45 times more energy than a python that is resting. That's like the difference between a sleeping horse and a horse running a race. But in a snake, all the action happens on the inside.

The digestive frenzy continues for a week. Then the python's body slowly returns to normal. So, don't allow yourself to challenge a python to an eating contest. It will beat you (no) hands down!

It takes a python about six days to fully digest its meal. Muscles constrict to push the food along. The stretchy stomach walls and intestines expand to hold the huge meal. Inside the snake, powerful stomach acids break down the meal to store as fat in the snake's body. The snake will use this energy for months to come. Anything the snake can't digest is expelled as a small pellet through an opening near the snake's tail.

