

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 19, NO 7 MARCH 2012

In January the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a ban on four snakes. It prohibits the interstate sale and importation of the Burmese python, yellow anaconda, and North African and South African pythons. The ban's focus is Everglades National Park in Florida, where the Burmese python is killing large numbers of animals that are native species.

The U.S. has a long history of dealing with exotic species. The U.S. Congress enacted the Lacey Act in 1900. The law dealt partly with hunting for profit and killings birds for the feather trade. One other goal, though, was to stop the introduction of harmful exotic species into the U.S. The recent ban is a new part of the Lacey Act.

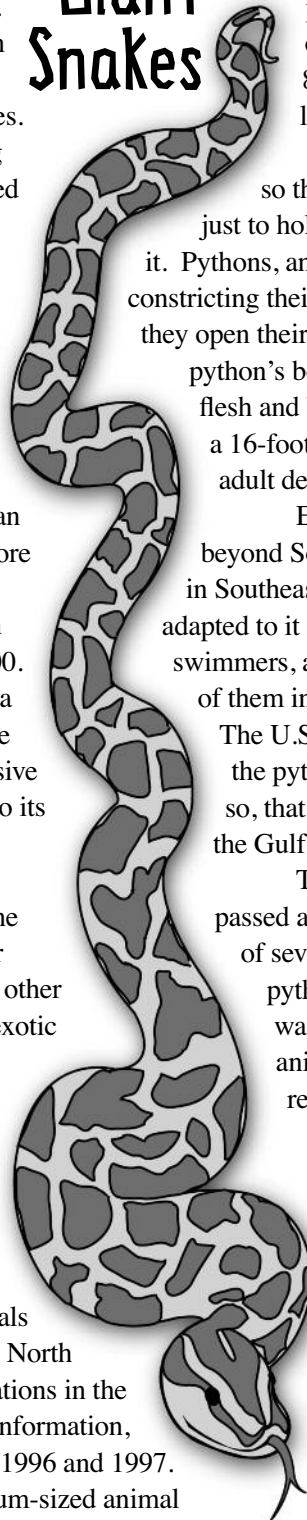
The Burmese python is the snake causing the most problems in the Everglades. It can grow to 26 feet long and weigh more than 200 pounds. There were no pythons there before the 1990s. The National Park Service now reports that 1,825 Burmese pythons have been caught in and around the Everglades since 2000. Nobody knows how many live in South Florida now, but wildlife experts estimate that there are tens of thousands. They have become an invasive species, one whose introduction causes harm to its new environment.

Experts have two theories about how Burmese pythons arrived in South Florida. One is that some python owners just got rid of their pets by releasing them in the Everglades. The other is that the snakes came accidentally from the exotic pet industry. When Hurricane Andrew struck Florida in 1992, it destroyed many pet stores and warehouses. About 900 Burmese pythons escaped, and they started reproducing in the wild.

They are with alligators at the top of the Everglades' food chain. Since the mid-1990s the pythons have been feasting on animals that are native to the region. A professor from North Carolina led a team that studied animal populations in the Everglades. From 2003–2011 they gathered information, then compared their numbers with those from 1996 and 1997.

The study shows that the park's medium-sized animal

New Ban Targets Giant Snakes



populations have collapsed. In those areas where the snakes have been living the longest, marsh rabbits, cottontail rabbits and foxes have disappeared completely. The raccoon population has declined by 99.3 percent, opossums by 98.9 percent, and bobcats by 87.5 percent. The snakes are also eating large numbers of birds and rodents.

Burmese pythons are not venomous, so their bite does not kill. They bite their prey just to hold it until they can coil themselves around it. Pythons, and other constrictors like anacondas, kill by constricting their muscles and suffocating their prey. Then they open their jaws and devour the animal whole. The python's body secretes acids that break down the flesh and bones. In October 2011 authorities found a 16-foot python resting after having devoured an adult deer.

Experts worry that the snakes will migrate beyond South Florida. Although their native habitat in Southeast Asia is not around salt water, they have adapted to it in the Everglades. They are excellent swimmers, and already people have caught several of them in the Florida Keys, islands 15 miles away. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service predicts that the python also will adapt to colder climates. If so, that could lead to pythons in other states on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts.

This is not the first ban on snakes. Florida passed a law in 2010 that bans future ownership of seven different snakes, including Burmese pythons. Originally the federal government wanted to ban nine snakes that threaten native animals. However, under pressure from the reptile industry, it reduced the number to four. That decision disappointed many people because the other five snakes remain a threat.

The ban takes effect in March.

It does not intend to get rid of large snakes in South Florida, but to control their numbers. The park's balance of nature allows native animal populations to do well there. This ban will start protecting them from huge snakes that do not belong there in the first place.

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In January the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a ban on four snakes. They are the Burmese python, yellow anaconda, and North African and South African pythons. The ban mainly protects Everglades National Park in Florida, where the Burmese python is killing many animals that are native species.

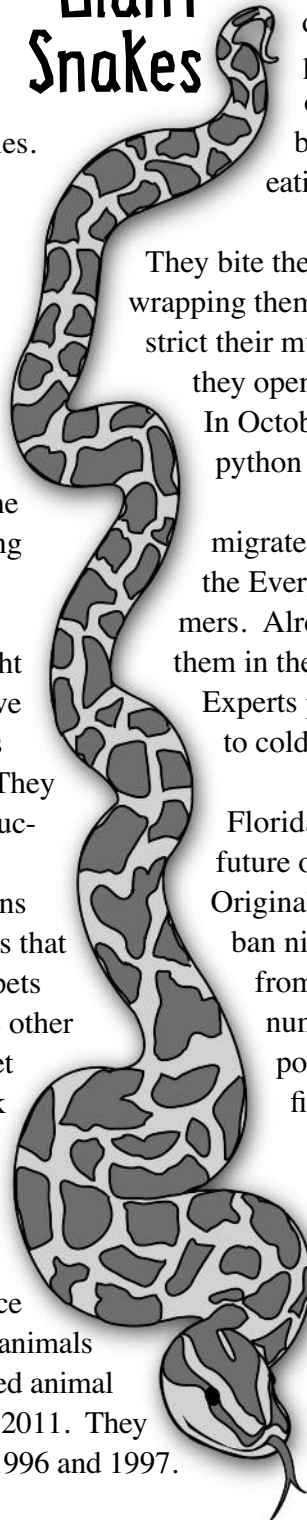
The U.S. has a long history of dealing with exotic species. In 1900 the Lacey Act stopped people from hunting for profit and killing birds for the feather trade. It also stopped the introduction of harmful exotic species into the U.S. The recent ban is a new part of the Lacey Act.

The Burmese python is causing the most problems. It can grow to 26 feet long and weigh more than 200 pounds. They were not in the Everglades before the 1990s, but 1,825 of them have been caught since 2000. Nobody knows how many live in South Florida now, but wildlife experts believe that there are tens of thousands. They are an invasive species, one whose introduction causes harm to its new environment.

Experts think that Burmese pythons arrived in South Florida two ways. One is that some python owners just got rid of their pets by releasing them in the Everglades. The other is that the snakes came from the exotic pet industry. When Hurricane Andrew struck Florida in 1992, it destroyed many pet stores and warehouses. About 900 Burmese pythons escaped.

The pythons are with alligators at the top of the Everglades' food chain. Since the mid-1990s they have been feasting on animals that are native to the region. A team studied animal populations in the Everglades from 2003–2011. They compared their numbers with those from 1996 and 1997.

New Ban Targets Giant Snakes



The study shows that populations of medium-sized animals have suffered. Where the snakes have been living the longest, rabbits and foxes have disappeared completely. The raccoon population has fallen by 99.3 percent, opossums by 98.9 percent, and bobcats by 87.5 percent. The snakes are also eating large numbers of birds and rodents.

Burmese pythons are constrictors. They bite their prey just to hold it, then kill it by wrapping themselves around it. When pythons constrict their muscles, they suffocate their prey. Then they open their jaws and eat the animal whole. In October 2011 authorities found a 16-foot python resting after it had eaten a deer.

Experts worry that the snakes will migrate. They have adapted to salt water in the Everglades and they are excellent swimmers. Already people have caught several of them in the Florida Keys, islands 15 miles away.

Experts predict that the python also will adapt to colder climates to the north.

This is not the first ban on snakes. Florida passed a law in 2010 that bans future ownership of seven different snakes. Originally the federal government wanted to ban nine snakes. However, under pressure from the reptile industry, it reduced the number to four. That decision disappointed many people because the other five snakes remain a threat.

The ban takes effect in March. It will not get rid of large snakes in South Florida, but control their numbers. The balance of nature allows native animal populations to do well in the Everglades. This ban will start protecting them from huge snakes that do not belong there.

Background Information

Everglades National Park is the third largest in the lower 48 states, after Death Valley and Yellowstone.

Burmese pythons can live 20 years. Females can reproduce at two years of age and lay about 50 eggs.

Invasive species can be plants, animals, and other organisms. Human actions are the primary cause of introducing invasive species into an ecosystem.

According to National Geographic, nearly half of the species on the U.S. endangered species list are threatened wholly or partly by nonnative species.

Researchers believe that some animal populations have fallen not only because the snakes have eaten them, but also because pythons reduce the amount of food available to them.

Most nonvenomous snakes are not a threat to humans. Constrictors can be though. The U.S. Humane Society reports that constrictors have caused 15 deaths, including that of a 2-year-old girl who was strangled.

In January a Florida Congressman introduced a bill in Congress to ban the other five snakes that the federal government had dropped from this ban. They are the boa constrictor, reticulated python, DeSchauensee's anaconda, green anaconda, and Beni anaconda.

In 2008 the Nature Conservancy began a "Python Patrol" program in the Florida Keys. Citizens can be part of its Eyes and Ears Team to report snake sightings. They include people like road crews, landscapers, postal workers and meter readers.

In 2010 Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission set up a call center. When people call the python hotline, it sends out a trained responder out to capture the snake.

The reptile industry is a \$2 billion business in the U.S. It fought the new ban by spending about \$400,000 on lobbyists since 2008.

For the population study, researchers drove 39,000 along roads in the Everglades area, mostly at night. When they conducted the same surveys in similar, python-free areas north of the park, they found normal concentrations of mammals.

Florida and the federal government spend millions of dollars each year to try to control snakes in the Everglades.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Describe how an ecosystem's food chain works.

Comprehension:

- What has the Burmese python been doing in South Florida?

Beyond the Text:

- Argue whether you think the federal government should have paid attention to the reptile industry, or not.
- Opponents of the ban say that people who want to own a snake on the banned list will just get one on the black market. Explain what a black market is and how it works.
- Why does the new ban not apply to zoos?

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: ban; interstate*; importation*; native; exotic; to enact*; invasive; industry; food chain; rodent; venomous*; to constrict; to suffocate; to devour*; to secrete*

High-use: to prohibit*; focus*; species; to estimate*; environment; theory*; to reproduce*; region; to collapse*; to decline*; prey; to migrate; to adapt; to predict

Sources

Orlando Sentinel February 16, January 31, 2012

Miami Herald February 8, 2012

Washington Post January 31, 2012

Gainesville Sun January 30, 2012

Buffalo News January 29, 2012

Daytona Beach News-Journal January 22, 2012

Sun Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale) January 18, 2012

Nature Conservancy www.nature.org

U.S. Dept. of Agriculture www.aphis.usda.gov

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

Science

4.2; 4.3; 6.5; 7.3

Ecology 6; Evolution 7, 8