

EDITORIAL

Big Snakes in the Everglades¹



Amidst scary headlines and hysterical responses, a snake-hunt is on in Florida. The state has long been the poster-child for herpetological invasions. In recent years, several species of reproducing and spreading constrictors have been identified. What to do about them has been contentious. Scientists have advocated eradication of incipient populations and regulations to reduce future risks. Unfortunately, managers considered action premature — until eradication has become essentially impossible. The pet trade is likely responsible for many of the introductions, either directly or through owner carelessness, and is eliciting strong commercial and emotional opposition to any action. Many hobbyists have seen any efforts to control these snakes as an overreaction. The United States Association of Reptile Keepers still opposes any actions to limit the trade, stating: “There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that banning the import, sale, and trade of any of these animals will have any positive effect on the economy, environment, or human or animal species health” (www.usark.org/uploads/NO%20on%20HR669.doc). They oppose “ideologically based legislation designed to exploit fear and misunderstanding in order to pass [a] federal law to ban the import, purchase, sale, trade, and breeding of many, many reptiles. HR6311 & Rule Change adding Boa, Python and Eunectes to the Injurious Wildlife List of the Lacey Act” (www.usark.org/positionstatements.php).

After a pet Burmese Python killed a toddler in Florida earlier this year, concern turned to action. Florida has begun regulating ownership of pythons and some other snakes, and the U.S. Congress is considering measures. A major tool chosen for use is a bounty system. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced that “trained and well-supervised volunteers [will] hunt down and

remove snakes.” As we write this, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission website reports that 13 “permit holders have captured and euthanized 14 Burmese Pythons on selected FWC-managed sites.” Unfortunately, the best estimates of python populations in Florida are in the tens of thousands, and the number captured to date clearly does not represent an effective response. This is in line with other such attempts; bounty programs have generally not been effective for controlling invasive reptilian species. More often than not, bounty programs generated unintended consequences, including habitat destruction, collection of non-target species, and intentional spread of the target species for future profit. **We oppose the bounty program now in place and call for measures that have more realistic goals and a better track record.** Prevention of spread of the existing populations and future colonization would be an appropriate focus for the near future.

The editors of this journal are committed to a science-based approach for the conservation of reptiles and amphibians. We advocate responsible husbandry of appropriate species, but also see the need for better regulation of problematic species. In addition, we strongly support a preventative, rather than a reactive approach to invasive species. Prevention is more effective and cheaper than trying to eradicate populations once they have become established — something that seems unlikely in the current case. Risk assessment can be a crucial part of efforts to identify potential problems in advance. We also support putting into place longer-term efforts, including the identification of pathways by which amphibian and reptilian species become established outside their native ranges, development of effective tools to prevent such events from occurring, and eradication of incipient populations.

¹ See newsbriefs on pp. 201 and 202 and the book review on p. 195.