

## EDITORIAL

# Florida Constrictors Unleash a Brouhaha



JENNIFER L. STABILE

Herpers are usually a friendly lot, more interested in a beer than a fight. This makes the current brouhaha over Florida and the possible future distributions of big snakes all the more unusual — and unpleasant.

The story has unfolded largely in Florida, which has long been the poster-child for non-native herp populations. Most of them have had little obvious impact, and generally have been considered harmless. Things changed when large constrictors were reported from the Everglades with increasing frequency. By the time the “powers-that-be” were willing to admit that this was a problem, the snakes had expanded their range and had begun eating endangered species. When an escaped domestic pet python killed a child, the scale of the problem was too large for comfort.

The U.S. Geological Survey was asked to identify the scale of the problem and offer solutions. One of their approaches was to model how much farther these species might spread based on the climate of native habitats. The models produced remarkably broad worst-case-scenario distributions, alarming all involved. The models used for such studies have assumptions and limitations, so their predictions have broad margins of error. Hiding behind this uncertainty, however, is as wrong in this case as it is when discussing global climate change.

Unfortunately, some in the herpetocultural community responded by declaring a personal war on the authors of the report. Presumably, the underlying cause was a fear that the possession of such animals would be banned.

This journal and its editors have long felt that responsible pet ownership is highly beneficial, encouraging the love and conservation of reptiles and amphibians. Nonetheless, research has long suggested that the origin of most introduced herpetological populations is the pet trade, and we have long been concerned with the less-responsible elements of the trade. The current fracas is a good example of the complexities involved when persons who presumably share a common interest are in conflict.

A boa or a python can be a great pet, but these large constrictors should not be loose outside of their native ranges. Most released and escaped pets die, and we consider this a great shame. Unfortunately, those that survive can become pests, impacting other species and hurting the image of herpetology as a whole, an equally great shame. In this no-win situation, the only solution lies in all interested parties coming together and developing a reasonable plan that eliminates — or at least greatly reduces — the likelihood that such animals are released in places where they do not belong.

We support measures that help reduce the risks of animals escaping or being inappropriately released, but consider outright bans on any particular species to be a last resort, not the first line of defense. Most of all, we deplore the rude and divisive tone that some in our community have taken in this case. It is unproductive, it is unprofessional, it is unscientific, and — most of all — it is lacking in basic civility.

The Editors of *Reptiles & Amphibians*