

On Burmese Pythons in the Everglades

Questions Posed and Answered on the Issues of Pythons in South Florida and in Captivity

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Executive Summary

The Issue

There is no doubt and no denying that a population of the Burmese python, *Python molurus bivittatus*, is now established and thriving in Everglades National Park and in adjacent areas of South Florida. The new presence of such a large snake species in the continental United States has precipitated proposed legislation that threatens to confiscate the rights of all Americans to own, study, maintain, and breed pythons.

The Proposed Legislation and Its Potential Impact

The issue at stake is Senate Bill 373 (S. 373), a proposal by Florida Senator Bill Nelson to place pythons on the Injurious Wildlife List of the Lacey Act. While the Lacey Act provides some leeway for differing interpretations from state to state, the reality is if pythons are listed as injurious wildlife, the owners of these pythons would not be able to sell, breed, or transport the snakes under penalty of federal law. The snakes could not be entered into any type of commercial activity.

Our Analysis

There are two issues that appear to have precipitated S. 373. One is the highly publicized presence of Burmese pythons in the Everglades. The second is the general presence of pythons in captivity.

Regarding the first issue: Burmese pythons are now established and flourishing in South Florida. It is unlikely that the species will be eradicated from Florida. It is equally unlikely that the species will migrate or expand its range in Florida beyond the historical Everglades region. At this time the Burmese python is correctly identified as an “established exotic species,” but not an “invasive” species. Burmese pythons have not demonstrated any potential to pose increased risk to human health, agriculture, or the ecosystem of South Florida.

This is a state issue, not a national issue. The state of Florida has enacted responsible and effective regulations regarding this issue.

Despite claims to the contrary, there is no evidence that released pets were the founding stock of the Burmese python population in South Florida. No person has ever been caught in the act, accused or convicted of releasing a python in South Florida. The founders of the Everglades python population were most likely imported hatchling pythons and not large adults. We considered various

possible scenarios and propose that hurricane damage to pet industry animal distributors is the most likely source.

Only minimal control and management of Burmese pythons likely will be necessary in the future. Realistic goals include reducing python populations in specific areas such as critical habitat or nesting areas of sympatric threatened species.

If further introductions of exotic tropical species of plants and animals are to cease, then we propose that the Port of Miami be closed to international shipments of plants and animals, and a northern port then be designated as the port-of-entry for tropical exotic species.

Most importantly, S. 373 will have NO EFFECT on the populations of Burmese pythons in Florida.

Regarding the second issue: Most pythons in captivity in the United States are captive-bred. There are 52 recognized species and subspecies of pythons; all but one are maintained in captivity in the USA. Every species but one has been bred in captivity by American keepers. It is likely that more than one million pythons are maintained in captivity in the USA at this time. There may be more than 500,000 Americans who lawfully maintain pythons. No provision is made as to the disposal of captive pythons should S. 373 be passed.

The direct effect of S. 373 will be to destroy the viable ancillary captive populations of python species currently maintained in the USA, considered by many to be one of the most valuable conservation accomplishments in recent decades. Passage of S. 373 would surely result in bankruptcies and foreclosures for thousands of American citizens at a time of the worst American economy in decades. **This proposal has no basis in science, education, conservation, public health, or public safety.** It is poorly and ambiguously written. S. 373 is no more than a restrictive animal-rights regulation that will take away the property rights of hundreds of thousands of Americans without compensation.

Conclusion

The presence of the Burmese python in Florida has been a giant issue played out in the media since the 2008 release of a fallacious and discredited paper published by self-serving USGS biologists. The resulting media hysteria has implanted an unrealistic image of the Burmese python as an invading monster; this has become indelibly etched in the public and political consciousness. **S. 373 will have no effect on the issue of pythons in Florida.**

The passage of S. 373 will mandate the confiscation of the property rights of hundreds of thousands of Americans who own pythons. It will destroy one of the most successful and effective captive-conservation projects ever created. At best, S. 373 should be considered unnecessary and ineffectual. **It will be publicly perceived as legislation to remove popular pets from American homes.**