

PYTHONS

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breeding like rabbits.

Some wildlife biologists estimate their numbers in the park now at about 5,000, most of them wild-born offspring of animals from the pet trade either purposely released or escaped from owners after major storms, such as hurricane Andrew at the beginning of the 1990s.

And some say there are many more than that, including State Representative Ralph Poppel, a Republican from Titusville who championed a new law that appeared on the books July 1.

Beginning in January, any who purchase pythons will be required to microchip them, pay a permitting fee of as much as \$100 a year, and account for the whereabouts of their pythons, including ones they report as dead, or risk both fines and even (in repeat cases of python irresponsibility) jail time.

"We had laws to control lions, tigers and poisonous snakes, the class one animals, but we didn't have a category to take care of invasive species — pythons, monitor lizards and iguanas, invasive rats down in the keys — things that are and can be super destructive to Florida's environment," he says.



POPELL

Just how destructive is anybody's guess.

"The devastating effect of the python is probably on the bird populations, young nesting birds," postulates David Piper, owner of the Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs, which supports four pythons, including a 16-footer. Piper was born and raised into creature care; his family has maintained the Wonder Gardens for seven decades.

"Pythons, snakes, will think of only two things: food and reproduction. That's it, and that may be why they're so prolific in the Everglades.

"So if somebody's real busy, he shouldn't have a snake as a pet, because if their needs aren't met, they become real aggressive, and that's not their fault.

"Think outside the box. If it's going to get huge, don't think about how pretty it is and how nice it is to have it in a 20-gallon container, but think about when you have to devote a whole room to it. You have to use common sense."

Beware: feeding pythons

So far, there is no bounty on a python's head, unlike the new bounty on the spiny-tailed iguanas that populate Gasparilla Island in such large numbers, ignoring the borderline between Lee and Charlotte Counties. That's unfortunate for those in Lee, since the county just contracted a private, Sarasota-based company to remove (kill) as many of the estimated 10,000 as it can, at \$20 a head.



PHOTO COURTESY EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK
This 13-foot burmese python bit off a bit more than he could chew. He and the alligator were both found dead in 2005 after the python ate the six-foot gator.

In the 'Glades, meanwhile, people are still trying to figure out where pythons go and what their habits actually are.

What the experts do know is that Burmese pythons eat anything that breathes, it seems, which includes native and sometimes endangered species that never heard of the jungles of Burma, or its predators.

"We've found everything (in their stomachs), from very small mammals — native cotton mice, native cotton rats, rabbits, squirrels — (to) possums, raccoons, even a bobcat, (and) most recently the hooves of a deer," says Skip Snow, a federal wildlife biologist stationed in the park, whose comments appeared in a New York Times story last week. "Everything from a house wren up through wading birds and water birds, pipe-billed grebes, coots, egrets, limpkins, and at least one big alligator."

Since they have killed people in domestic settings in the United States only occasionally — if you Google this question you'll find reports of only a few deaths by python in the last few years — they probably aren't much of a threat in the wild to human beings, especially since not a lot of people are wandering around on foot deep in the Everglades.

Just don't get near a big hungry one.

"How much of a threat is it?" asks Piper rhetorically. "That depends on how hungry it is, and how many you have in a feeding situation. If a snake finishes a rabbit or a chicken first and it smells chicken on another snake — and part of that chicken is sticking out — it's going to eat that, too. I saw a 16-foot python eat a rabbit and then consume an entire 10-foot python."

The unorthodox but highly successful fit between an invasive creature and a wild setting usually stems from three conditions: the right climate, an abundant food supply, and few natural enemies.

"The climate here is a lot like that in Burma," points out Scott Gregory, a resource naturalist at the Calusa Nature Center, "and we've plenty of things for them to eat, like raccoons, 'possums, skunks, rabbits, even alligators."

Not long ago, a massive dead python was found in the Everglades with a six-foot alligator sticking out of its stomach — it had obviously consumed the 'gator

before something else killed it. And other eyewitness accounts of battles between pythons and big alligators have come from both tourists and wildlife officials.

"That doesn't surprise me in the least, because in South America and Brazil you see those reticulated pythons eating alligators — caimans — every day," says Gregory.

But getting rid of them all before they significantly alter the Everglades ecosystem — that's a question for which answers and opinions vary.

"They've got to be killed, and it's not illegal for you or me to kill one, although we ask that you contact officials to let them know where you saw it, or where it is," insists Rep. Poppel.

David Piper, who respects the snakes as formidable and singularly focused predators, thinks it can be done.

"The wisest thing the state could do is put a bounty on them, and hire some educated hunters. The could go in there in airboats and take care of a lot of snakes in a short period of time."

Piper explains the word "educated" this way: people who will not mistake and kill other snakes native to the Everglades, like the big eastern Indigos, or grab the disappearing tail of a big cottonmouth, mistaking it for a python.

But Gregory thinks they're here to stay.

"Let's say there really are 5,000 of them, and you can kill 4,000 — you've still got 1,000 out there, so it's more than likely they'll be a permanent part of the environment. And as far as exotic animals go, I also think we have a lot more important things to worry about in the world than pythons. They won't go on a killing spree, they won't eat a human, and as far as Florida goes, Brazilian peppers and melaleuca are two of the most annoying things you'll ever find."

As for their ability to breed, it's significant, and fully deserving of the "breed like rabbits" analogy — but breeding isn't the same thing as surviving, says Chris McQuade, owner of Gulf Coast Reptiles. He breeds and raises "high-end polymorphs (such as albino pythons), not just the typical native or imported species, to sell to advanced private collectors.

"They lay their eggs once a year, and the typical clutch is between 30 or 40, but it can be much lower or it can go as high as 70," he explains of pythons.

"But survivability can be very low. In Southeast Asia one in 50 might survive. For the occasional 'gator or deer a big one might eat, there's a balance — the babies are food items for lots and lots of animals: turtles, raccoons, 'possums, hawks, eagles, other snakes, even big bass."

And even adults, the apex predators at the top of the food chain, can provide food for alligators on occasion, or panthers, McQuade says.

"So the concern is extremely overdone," he says. "I think there are natural boundaries that would keep them from spreading further (colder climates, for example), and I think nature and other predators will balance them out."

What proves much harder to balance out, in McQuade's opinion, is a blanket law that doesn't look at the nuances in nature.

"If you wanted to restrict these things, why not just ban the normal colored varieties, because the colored anomalies would probably not survive in the wild anyway."

There are other threats

Instead of the overly dramatized threat of the big snakes, look to true threats, McQuade advises — like feral cats. "They do far more damage to birds and native species than all the introduced species combined," he says. "Even dogs, or horses, or sharks or alligators — look at the statistics to see who is the biggest threat to people."

Not the big snakes, in other words.

Piper, at the Everglades Wonder Gardens, offers arguably the most practical idea of all: Use them as a food source to feed the homeless.

"Given what they eat, and the fact that snakes are a delicacy in so many places, they'd probably be very good, and it would be shame to waste all that meat," he says. The idea is not so far-fetched; a 200-pound snake could provide a great deal of protein to hungry people, and similar programs in such states as Colorado offer fresh, road-killed deer and elk to homeless centers.

Piper has never eaten a python, he says — he's only been bitten by one (and by other snakes, too — the first time in the face by a very large indigo snake when he was a boy).

What you don't do if one latches onto you is fight it, he advises.

"It's not a happy experience," he reports. "Their teeth are slanted backwards, so once they're into you they aren't coming out easily. You get the nearest stick or crowbar you can find, and first you pry off the upper jaw, and then you pry off the lower jaw."

Which may be the best model for a large-scale eradication program in Florida's Everglades — don't fight them directly, just pry them off slowly. How?

"That's the million dollar question," says Gregory.

CASKETS

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In one case Cordero said she spoke with a father and daughter who were very interested in buying a casket.

And what's the deal with casket shopping anyway? For most folks, casket shopping trips don't usually register high on the fun things to do on a Saturday afternoon list.

It comes down to dollars and cents.

Places like Costco can slash prices of the traditionally high priced after-life receptacles from what many funeral homes charge.

"It's a fraction of the cost," McClusky said.

According to US-funerals.com, funeral homes can mark up caskets more than 600 percent of their cost. These prices, which can reach \$5,000, could financially strap a family too heart-broken over the loss of a loved one to consider shopping for a better deal on a

casket.

But at Costco, a customer can buy a casket for as low as \$799.99 — all in the comfort of their own home via online. Applications are available in Naples at the casket kiosk.

And as far as quality and aesthetics go, Costco features a variety of types and quality.

"They're very nice looking," McCluskey said.

The caskets come in a variety of colors such as soothing slate blues and delicate lilac. For more posh tastes there is the Argos Cherry Casket which features a premium beige velvet interior, memorial and record tube and swing bar handles. It sells for \$2,999.99.

And for the more feminine person's in one's life there is the Kentucky Rose casket with pink crepe interior.

The caskets are available in different lengths and sizes as well.

And since there will always be a demand for caskets, the business is kept under tight tabs by the Federal Trade Commission.

The FTC makes sure that folks are not being ripped off or told by funeral homes that they cannot purchase caskets elsewhere.

According to the Funeral Consumer Alliance, a recent FTC staff opinion made on July 18 says that that funeral homes cannot charge consumers extra for storing a casket that the consumer bought from outside the funeral home, and funeral homes can't charge extra to dispose of the packaging material from the outside casket.

Choices for caskets tend to be based on individual taste and cost.

According to US-funerals.com, prices of Caskets vary greatly based upon their composition and hardware. The cost of a casket may vary from a minimal amount for a fiberboard item to thousands of dollars for a sounder constructed casket.

Wooden Caskets can be constructed from a variety of woods such as pine, walnut, cherry, mahogany or oak. Pine is usually the least expensive and rarely on display in funeral homes for this reason.

Metal caskets can be composed of bronze, copper or stainless steel construction. Bronze and copper constructed caskets are priced by weight per square foot. Stainless steel caskets are categorized by their thickness or gauge.

It is important to note that regardless of the casket's features there are no guarantees about how long or how well the remains will preserve inside them. Items like gaskets and seals tend to drive up the price of the coffin rather than hold any benefit.

But when it comes down to it, death like taxes is not going away. Either are the containers used to support the afterlife needs.

So if you are looking for a good deal in preparing for the next world it might be close as your neighborhood Costco.

And in case you were wondering what its like to work surrounded by caskets all day?

It seems it's like anything else.

"You just get used to them being there," Cordero said.