

Dangers of invasive pythons in florida



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

To analyze the dangers posed by pythons in Florida, one looks at the information on case study, location, statistics, dangers to the ecosystem, methods of control and laws. It is a fact that large pythons do pose a major threat to numerous aspects of life. Wildlife biologist Skip Snow states, "We're bringing them into the country under the idea that they're all innocent until proven guilty" (Kessler 8). Since there are many uncertainties about just how much of a problem the pythons truly pose, officials feel that measures are necessary to further understand them.

However, much data and information is available about the pythons; still, there is a great deal that is unknown about their biology and natural behavior. Currently, there are several groups conducting studies about problems that large pythons are causing, problems that they may cause in the future and methods to control their effects on local ecosystems. One group of scientists at Davidson College in North Carolina took ten Burmese pythons from Florida to an outdoor enclosure in South Carolina. The purpose of the experiment was to see how far north Burmese pythons could survive.

While the group was conducting the experiment, all 10 snakes proved capable of surviving 12 nights in December, in temperatures of only 41 degrees. It was not until January, when South Carolina was hit with temperatures that were uncommonly cold for the area and the snakes died. Study leader, Michael Dorcas said, "There certainly is a possibility that pythons could survive in South Carolina and possibly even farther north" (Kessler 7). Also, the group reported that the snakes' being from Florida may have played a factor in their deaths when cold weather hit South Carolina.

Since previous studies about snakes correlate birth region with capabilities for tolerance to colder temperatures, experts feel that it is possible for snakes born in cooler areas to thrive almost anywhere. A second study that is currently underway is being conducted by Frank Mazzotti, professor of wildlife at the University of Florida. Mazzotti's studies involve tagging and releasing large pythons. According to him, " It's breeding time and females attract males and we have three eager young lads sitting out there with radio transmitters on them who can lead us to the breeding female and we can catch her" (Jeneault 4).

During the recent snake hunt conducted by Florida Fish and Wildlife, which Mazzotti helped organize, three of the 68 snakes captured were implanted with radio transmitters and released back into Everglades National Park. One source explains, " Until the snakes are recaptured, Mazzotti and his team will focus on analyzing the data they collected from the 65 snakes which were euthanized" (Jeneault 4). Everyone involved with studying large pythons in Florida agrees that they need to be managed.

As said by Kenneth Krysko, a scientist with the Florida Museum of Natural History, " It is unlikely that [the pythons] will be exterminated" (Bove 11). Research shows that current efforts are more focused on controlling python population than on completely removing them from Florida. Most studies and documented information on Florida's pythons focuses on the Burmese. In fact, studies show that three large python species are taking hold in the state: African rock, reticulated and Burmese, which all pose a major threat to Florida's natural ecosystem.

Since Native regions for these snakes include Asia, Africa and South America and are similar to a large area of the southeastern United States, research indicates, that these reptiles may not be a problem limited solely to Florida. In an article published by Nature. org, Serbesoff-King adds, " Their native habitat compares well to the Gulf region of the southern United States" (3). In Asia, Burmese pythons live at the base of the Himalayas, making them relatively resistant and somewhat used to cooler temperatures. In a study conducted by the U. S.

Geological Survey in 2008, a scientist predicted, " The pythons could find suitable climate in about a third of the United States, as far north as Washington D. C. " (Kessler 7). Currently, the snakes exist mostly in just the southern half of Florida, even though a few have been found in the northern segment. Mainly they are located in Everglades National Park, Southern Glades Wildlife and Environmental National Park, Southern Glades Wildlife and Environmental Area and the surrounding locations. Additionally, they are also located in Big Cypress National Preserve and Collier Seminole State Park.

According to Frank Mazzotti, " Many of the snakes we catch we catch along roads, and we learn where else in the landscape they go" (Jeneault 4). Because reptiles are cold blooded animals, they need to regulate their body temperatures to avoid over heating or freezing to death. In warm weather, snakes can be found around bodies of water. In retrospect, during cold weather, snakes will find warm places to lie, such as on roads and on the edges of concrete canals. The sun warms up these hard surfaces giving the

snakes a perfect spot to gather up some warmth, which they use to regulate their body temperatures.

During breeding season pairs of pythons collect around the vegetation of canals; females will then stay with the nest and guard it until eggs hatch. When it comes to just how far the pythons will spread, Skip Snow says, " The snakes are going to tell us. They're clearly here, and they're breeding and they're established and they're going to tell us over the years just what they can put up with and how far they can go" (Kessler 8). A major factor that one should consider while analyzing python dangers is statistics. According to Smithsonian. om, " Carla Dove, head of the National Museum of Natural History's Feather Identification Lab, identified 25 species of birds from the stomach contents of 85 Burmese pythons in 2001" (Bove 10). One fact to take into consideration is that snakes are able to eat animals of up to three times their girth. This means that very few species of animals that are safe from a python take-over; in fact, there are reports of declining mammal populations in the Everglades over the past few years. In recent studies of large pythons that have been captured, scientists have performed necropsies to show just how large a threat pythons pose.

An article published in August of 2012, by " National Geographic News" tells of a 17. 7 foot long Burmese python that was captured and euthanized. Upon performing a necropsy, a University of Florida team announced, "... a necropsy on the euthanized python revealed she was carrying 87 eggs- also a state record for the species" (Dell'Amore 9). Burmese pythons are able to grow to lengths of over 20 feet and weigh well over 100 pounds. Studies

show that their reproductive abilities, combined with their size, is an alarming factor of the python's capabilities.

Since 1990, over 100, 000 of these snakes have been brought into the country. In analyzing problems being caused by large pythons, one needs to look at dangers that they pose to native ecosystems. In southern Florida, wildlife officials and scientists are concerned about native species' ability to survive the influx of these large constrictors. Animals being consumed by non-native snakes include, but are not restricted to, deer, bobcats, alligators, wood storks and Key Largo wood rats. In fact, some species in Florida are already endangered and may not survive against populations of invasive reptiles, experts say.

J. D. Willson, a biologist from the University of Arkansas says, " A Burmese python as big as the new title holder " should be able to eat nearly any native animal in South Florida"- even Florida panthers" (Dell'Amore 9). Effects of these reptiles are pushing some species towards extinction and also cause problems for snakes that are native to Florida. As said by Jennifer Bove, " Invasive species are notorious for out competing - and eating - native species..." (10). Snakes such as the Eastern diamond back and the cotton mouth now have to compete with non-native snakes for their food source.

Also, smaller reptiles are being pushed out of their hunting areas by larger ones. In turn, this may cause a larger problem in the near future as native species search for new areas to hunt and live. Since Burmese pythons require a hearty food source and shelter, they have found both in the Everglades. In an article written by myfwc. com, the U. S. Geological Survey

<https://assignbuster.com/dangers-of-invasive-pythons-in-florida/>

says, “ Burmese Pythons and other giant constrictor snakes have shown themselves to be highly adaptable to new environments” (5). According to reports, invasive pythons have the ability to completely overrun an ecosystem.

Surprisingly, authorities say that dangers posed to people are of very little concern, because Burmese pythons and other large pythons are non-venomous and usually are not very aggressive. In fact, most documented snake bites are reported by people who own the animals as pets. Commonly misunderstood, a snake is not an animal that has been documented to chase or purposefully attack humans. To avoid being bitten by a snake, one simply needs to not handle a wild animal without having proper training and experience. Finally, authorities urge people to use caution and care when dealing with large reptiles.

Presently, Florida wildlife officers and scientists are working on methods to control python populations. One option is snake round-ups in Everglades National Park. In an article by Elizabeth Jeneault, published on February 18, 2013, one reads, “ The Florida Python Challenge ended on this weekend with the round-up of a mere 68 snakes” (4). Although some wildlife experts were disappointed by the number of captured snakes, the event showed that there is obviously a plentiful population of these snakes living and thriving in Florida’s national parks.

Frank Mazzotti states, “ We’ve never collected so many pythons in such a short period of time. It really is an unprecedented sample” (Jeneault 4). With any luck, experts feel all of the information collected from the snake hunt will help in future efforts to control invasive species, research indicates. In efforts

to control, a second method is the python hotline. The Nature Conservancy created the hotline so that trained responders could be dispatched rapidly and 24 hours a day. If anyone should need to contact a python patrol member, the number is: 1-888-IVE-GOT-1.

In an article published by nature. org, it states that Cheryl Millett says, “ Python Patrol is a perfect model for alerting people to report the snakes and training people who can respond to the discoveries in order to stop expansion of invasive pythons from the Everglades” (1). Currently there are only 10 counties that have trained responders, but officials are making more efforts throughout the state. For individuals who are striving to the control large pythons, special training secessions teach proper methods of capture.

One of the most common and safest ways to capture a large snake is called tread milling, which involves a person’s grabbing a snake from behind and walking his or her hands up the body. Typically two people are involved, one of whom is used to distract the animal’s attention. An article published by nature. org writes that Cheryl Millett says, “ We ask the responders to consider safety first and then work to tire out the snake before they capture it. Luckily these pythons tire very quickly” (1). Right now majority of efforts aim more towards control rather than complete removal of invasive pythons from Florida.

The main issue of total removal is due to the vast size and inaccessibility of areas with snakes. Presently, the main focus of population control is based on areas where pythons will have a larger effect. As Skip Snow states, “ We have no proven eradication tools for introduced reptiles anywhere in the world, really. It’s never done, and we have no studies to go to...” (Kessler 8).

<https://assignbuster.com/dangers-of-invasive-pythons-in-florida/>

What this means is that, not anywhere in the world that an invasive reptile has gained hold, has the animal ever been completely removed.

Reports show, that keeping the pythons from spreading may be the only true method of control. When it comes to legal factors in Florida, one finds there are laws regulating what pet's people may have. Most of the laws are fairly new and have been passed within the last five years; they stand as a final effort in controlling growing populations of nonnative reptile species. For owners who had the snakes as pets before the bans went into effect, the snakes are "grandfathered" in; however, laws now require owners to have a valid license for these reptiles.

Additionally, State law makers have compiled a list of snakes and lizards that are no longer allowed to be bought or sold in Florida. As Skip Snow says, "As for Florida's pythons, the genie is already out of the bottle. But it's not too late to prevent the next invasion, considering how popular big snakes are in the pet trade" (Kessler 8). Currently the list of banned animals includes several large snakes and one monitor lizard, but officials are taking steps to add nice more reptiles to the list. The Florida Legislature put these measures into action in 2010.

As of January 17, 2012, the same ban was enacted on the federal level and is being called the Federal Lacey Act. Senator Bill Nelson is leading the battle against importation and interstate commerce of large pythons. On the other side of the spectrum, one finds that some regulations are actually being relaxed. In past years python hunts have required participants to have licenses and in-person training before taking part in the hunts. This year's

event did not require people to have either. As with certain species of animals, depending on the state, hunters are not required to have a license.

Pythons are now being put into this category in Florida, making it easier to control their populations. As a result, PETA is taking a stand on the methods of extermination of the reptiles. A second main concern about this is that people may not be correctly identifying the snakes, which may cause the deaths of native species, as well. In analyzing the dangers posed by pythons in Florida, one looks at the information on case study, location, statistics, dangers to the ecosystem, methods of control and laws, then one comes to realize that the pythons may be here to stay.

Bob Janiskee says, " We don't want to merely keep the python problem from getting worse... What we really hope to do is reduce the free-roaming python population of South Florida to the ' ecologically extinct' level..." (Bove 11). As a result, one learns from research that the remaining issue is control instead of eradication. There is already talk among the scientific community that Florida may have to add the invasive reptiles to the native species list in the future.