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To avoid 'giant python in Everglades,' lawmaker working to ban import, trade

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It reads like the plot to a budget horror flick: Pythons fill up the Everglades and spread across the southern third of the United States.



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This python was given to Metrozoo by its overwhelmed owner.



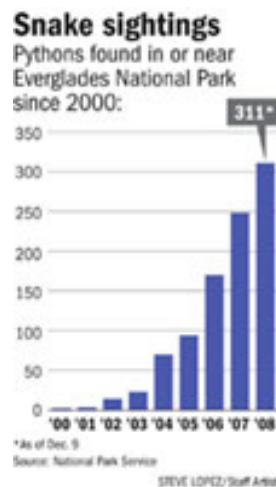
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This python was rescued after it was hit by a car in Jupiter.

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Looking to get rid of a supersize snake, lethargic lizard or burdensome bird?

On March 21, the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is holding a Nonnative Amnesty Day at the Miami Metrozoo where owners can turn in their unwanted exotic pets - a much more environmentally friendly alternative to dumping them in the wild.

Just don't show up with your dogs and cats. They're not considered exotic.

The commission is also looking for volunteers to give the pets a new home. Potential adopters must have experience caring for exotic animals and in some cases must have a special license.

Information and applications are available at www.myfwc.com. Click on "Be a nonnative pet adopter."

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That's the nightmare U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson lays out in legislation he filed Tuesday to ban the import or interstate trade of the reptiles.

Since a handful of pythons first appeared in the Everglades in the mid-1990s, sightings have increased exponentially from year to year. The Florida Democrat's bill aims to block sales to inexperienced pet owners, who in many cases have either released the snakes or let them escape when the creatures grew too large.

Certain species, such as the Burmese python, can grow as long as 20 feet and weigh 250 pounds.

Nelson has worked to stop the snakes' spread, noting they have been found to devour wading birds and other endangered species and could disrupt the same Everglades the government is trying to restore.

"If we don't do something soon, we're going to regret it," Nelson said in a speech last month at an Everglades conference in Miami. "I don't want it to get to the point where they find a panther in the belly of an 18-foot Burmese python."

More than 300 pythons were found in and around Everglades National Park last year - three times the number in 2005.

"It's not unreasonable to think that represents 1 percent of what's out there," said park wildlife biologist Skip Snow. That would put their numbers at more than 30,000.

Snow has estimated that the park is capable of holding more than 130,000 pythons.

Florida law requires that owners of any of the four largest python species, including the Burmese, tag the reptiles with microchip identification and maintain a permit that carries a \$100 annual fee.

Opponents of the federal bill say those safeguards are enough. They also warn of unintended consequences, such as driving snake sales underground or encouraging owners who might otherwise sell their unwanted reptiles to dump them instead.

Marshall Meyers, CEO of the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, said the bill attempts to circumvent a U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service review already under way to decide whether to clamp down on the snakes.

"This is basically legislation substituting itself for science," Meyers said.


He and others question suggestions that Florida's python population could number in the tens of thousands.

Andrew Wyatt, who heads the advocacy group United States Association of Reptile Keepers, emphasizes that nobody knows exactly how many snakes are out there, and the likelihood of encountering a python in the vast Everglades remains slim.

"The idea of a giant python in the Everglades is very scary," Wyatt said. "The reality is you'd be lucky to see one."

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http://www.palmbeachpost.com/hp/content/local_news/epaper/2009/02/04/a1b_pythons_0205.html

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