

Giant pythons invade Florida

Scientists warn that two non-native python breeds could produce an invasive hybrid python in the Everglades.



BASIC

Neither of these two snakes belongs in the United States. The Burmese python shown on the left comes from Southeast Asia, and the African rock python, shown on the right, come from the southern half of Africa. But now they are both found in parts of Florida.

How do you think they got there? Many people buy so-called “exotic” animals as pets, and many of the exotic pets brought to the United States come through Miami. Some sellers of these snakes may have released unwanted ones into the wild, even though this is illegal. These snakes are causing prob-

lems in Florida, because they have no natural enemies to

keep their populations down like they would in their native countries. And now scientists are worried that the two types of pythons could get together and breed. If they do, their offspring would be a “hybrid,” — that is, a new breed with traits from both parents. If these hybrids can also reproduce, it would mean even more snake problems for Florida. Let’s find out more about this problem, NEXT

GENERAL

Neither of these two types of snakes belongs in the United States, but both are causing problems in parts of Florida. They are pythons, a type of powerful snake that kills its prey by wrapping it up and suffocating it so it can’t breathe. The Burmese python shown on the left belongs in Southeast Asia, and the African rock python, shown on the right, belongs in the southern half of Africa. **How do you think they came to Florida?** The city of Miami, Florida, is the center of the so-called “exotic pet” trade. Many unusual animals are brought to Miami and sold to breeders and pet stores. But these pythons grow very large — up to 20 feet long — and can be very aggressive. Experts think that the snakes were released into the wild by pet owners or breeders who were unprepared to take care of their snakes. This is illegal, but

there isn’t much the police can do unless they catch someone in the act.

These pythons are causing problems in Florida. **Who can guess why?** They have no natural enemies to keep their population in check like they would have in their native countries. And now scientists are warning of another problem: the two breeds could get together and reproduce. Their offspring would be something called a “hybrid.” Hybrid animals are the offspring of two different breeds, which have a combination of the traits of both parents. Most animals can only reproduce with other animals of the same type. But some different types can reproduce — the offspring of a horse and a donkey is a mule. If Burmese pythons and African rock pythons can reproduce, it means more snake problems for Florida. NEXT

ADVANCED

These pythons aren’t native to Florida, but they’re causing big problems in the sunshine state nonetheless. They have arrived in Florida via the exotic pet trade, much of which is centered in Miami. Pythons can grow up to 20 feet long and can be aggressive. Unprepared breeders and pet owners likely illegally released the pythons into the wild. Some lawmakers have tried to ban exotic pets, while others say this would drive the lucrative trade underground and make it harder to regulate. Although it is illegal to release non-native animals into the wild, authorities say it is nearly unenforceable unless they catch someone in the act. **What do you think could be done to curb this problem? Why do you think there is such a thriving market for exotic pets?**

Burmese pythons, like the one on the left, are known to be living in the Everglades, and African rock pythons, shown here on the right, have been found very nearby. Separately, these snakes have caused problems for native species, and we’ll look more at this problem in a moment. But wildlife biologists warn of another danger: the two species could interbreed and create a hybrid breed. This has happened in captivity, but not yet in the wild. Most hybrid offspring of two species are sterile. **Can you think of any examples of this?** (*The mule, the offspring of a horse and a donkey; or the liger, the offspring of a lion and a tiger*) But because of a rare phenomenon called “hybrid vigor,” there’s a chance the two pythons could create a fertile hybrid, which would add to Florida’s python problems. NEXT

Giant pythons invade Florida (cont'd)

Invasive species can wipe out native species.

BASIC

The map here shows where Burmese pythons have been found in Florida. They've mainly been found in the Everglades, a huge area of swamps and wetlands in Florida. Much of the Everglades is a national park. **Have you ever been to the Everglades?** The photo here shows what happened when a Burmese python took on a Florida alligator. **What do you think happened here?** (*The python tried to swallow the big alligator, but its stomach burst.*) Pythons are an "invasive species." This means that they have been brought to an area where they don't belong, and they are a danger to the native animals there. In



Florida, there are no natural predators for these pythons.

What is a predator? (*An animal that kills another animal for food.*) This summer, Florida began a python hunt, allowing hunters to kill pythons in the wild. So far, about 18 pythons have been killed, out of an estimated 150,000 in the wild. **Is this hunt a good way to deal with the python problem in Florida? How else could the state control its python problem?** END

GENERAL

The map here shows where pythons have been found in Florida, mainly in or near the Everglades. The Everglades is a huge area of swamp and wetlands, much of which is a national park. **Have you ever been to the Everglades?** The photo here shows what happened when two of the most powerful predators in the Everglades met — a Burmese python and an alligator. The python tried to eat the alligator, but the python's stomach burst open, and you can see part of the alligator sticking out in front. But since nobody saw the fight, it's impossible to say what happened. **What do you think happened?**

This Burmese python didn't survive, but in general pythons survive very well in

the Everglades. They survive so well that they are a danger to the native animals in the Everglades, and even pets in the area. Pythons kill their prey by quickly wrapping around it and suffocating it. Animals that are introduced to an area and then take over are called "invasive species." Pythons have been known to be an invasive species in Florida for more than 10 years, and Florida officials are trying to figure out what to do about it. This summer, Florida began allowing hunters to kill pythons in the wild. **Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?** So far, hunters have killed fewer than 20 pythons, out of an estimated 150,000 in the state. **How else do you think Florida could deal with its python problem?** END

ADVANCED

This map shows the areas where pythons have been found in Florida, mainly in or near the Everglades. Pythons have survived and thrived in the Everglades, becoming an invasive species over the past 10 years. They quickly established themselves at the top of the food chain, surpassing the alligator. The photo here is evidence of a struggle between a Burmese python and a gator. **Have you seen this photo before?** In this case, both combatants came out on the losing end, but it likely wasn't the struggle that killed this python. Experts speculate that the snake was too full and immobilized to escape another gator's attack, or the snake's stomach simply burst because its prey

was too big.

Florida's governor Charlie Crist was spurred to action after a released python killed a toddler in the state earlier this spring. The governor began a python bounty hunt, and the hunt was recently expanded. But so far, fewer than two-dozen pythons have been killed, of an estimated population of 150,000. In addition, Florida lawmakers plan to tighten state python regulations, including possibly raising the \$100 price tag for an ownership permit. **What do you think is the best way for Florida to tackle its python problem? Do you think owning pythons should be banned in the state? Why or why not?** END