

Hunters help Florida get a grip on python problem

As I See It

By Rodney Barreto Chairman

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

There is a growing concern in South Florida regarding how we should help control a particular nonnative reptile that has been receiving a lot of media attention lately. I'm talking about the Burmese python problem we are experiencing.

Most experts believe pet owners are at least partly responsible for the situation we are in because they released their pet pythons into the wild illegally when the snakes had grown too large to care for. Over time, these invasive snakes have spread throughout the Everglades. Since the Burmese python has few natural predators in Florida, its numbers have grown into the thousands in South Florida, and it has been preying on native wildlife, including the federally endangered Key Largo woodrat.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) manages four wildlife management areas (WMAs) on the python's northern-most range: Everglades and Francis S. Taylor, Holey Land, Rotenberger and Big Cypress. Because hunters have always played a key role with conservation in this state, it only makes sense to enlist their assistance once again to help eradicate these invasive reptiles from Florida and prevent their northward movement.

And so, the FWC established an executive order giving licensed hunters and those with a statewide alligator harvest permit the opportunity, if they wish, to harvest Burmese pythons, should they come across any during their normal pursuit of deer, wild hogs, furbearers, alligators or other game on these four WMAs. This is, of course, during established hunting seasons when these species are legal to take.

What this means is, any licensed hunter who also has the necessary permits (i.e., management area permit, archery or muzzleloading gun permit, quota permit) to

hunt on any of these four WMAs is eligible to participate. In addition, those with a statewide alligator harvest permit can participate if that permit enables them to hunt alligators on any of those WMAs.

To be even more specific, properly licensed and permitted hunters can harvest Burmese pythons during specified hunting seasons and during legal shooting hours on these four WMAs. And those who have a statewide alligator harvest permit allowing them to hunt alligators in the counties where these WMAs lie can harvest Burmese pythons through Nov. 1, during legal hunting hours.

Besides Burmese pythons, all reptiles of concern may be harvested, including the Indian python, reticulated python, African rock python, amethystine or scrub python, green anaconda and Nile monitor lizard. However, there is a slim chance of encountering any of these other reptiles of concern in the wild in South Florida other than the Burmese python.

There are some method-of-take stipulations, though, that participating hunters must follow. Hunters may use nets and snares to capture reptiles of concern, but they must euthanize them on site. Hunters also can use guns and firearms in taking these reptiles during hunting periods when their specific use is allowed (i.e., bows during archery season, muzzleloaders during muzzleloading gun season, etc.). When alligator hunting, people may use all legal methods for taking alligators, including bang sticks, harpoons and spear guns, to take reptiles of concern.

Any harvested reptile of concern may not be taken out of the areas alive and must be reported to the FWC within 36 hours by calling, toll-free, 866-392-4286 or going to MyFWC.com and choosing Burmese pythons from the "Quick Clicks" section. However, any reptile of concern taken from Big Cypress must be checked in at one of the area's six check stations.

You can even have some fancy cowboy boots made from python, but I don't recommend eating the meat because, according to the National Park Service, testing done on two dozen captured Burmese pythons in the Everglades revealed high levels of mercury in the meat—levels well above that considered safe to eat.

If you do not feel safe or comfortable approaching and harvesting a reptile of concern, that's understandable, but the FWC would still like you to report any such sightings by calling the toll-free number or going online.

If you'd like more information on Burmese pythons or the current situation, visit MyFWC.com/Nonnatives.

Hunters historically have played critical roles in conservation in this state, and I'd like to thank them once again for their contributions in helping us eradicate these invasive, nonnative reptiles from South Florida—thereby preserving native wildlife for the future of hunting in Florida.

Holiday ornament sale to benefit scholarship fund

Okeechobee Retired Educators will once again offer the fourth limited edition Christmas ornaments.

The ornament is 24kt gold on brass and includes a numbered certificate with historical information. The ornaments are just \$15 each and proceeds from the sale benefit the scholarship fund.

Ornaments from previous years are also

available in limited quantities for \$10 each. Please call one of the following members if you are interesting in purchasing an ornament: Gay Carlton - 863-763-5755; Kay McCool - 863-763-2829, Paulette Whipple - 863-467-2487, Pam Trent - 863-763-3060, Regina Hamrick - 863-763-8865, Harel Parnis - 863-467-1767 or Marion Davis at 863-763-3991.

Community Calendar

Friday

Tops Take off Pounds Sensibly #669 meets at 9 a.m. at the First United Methodist Church, 200 N.W. Second St. The public is invited. Anyone interested in a sensible approach to losing weight and becoming a part of a caring group is welcome to come and see what we are all about. For information, contact Ollie Morgret at 800-932-8677.

A.A. meeting from noon until 1 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church, 200 N.W. Second St. This is an open meeting.

A.A. meets from 8 until 9 p.m. at the Church of Our Saviour, 200 N.W. Third St. This is an open speaker meeting.

Compulsive overeaters are invited to a weekly meeting. **Overeaters Anonymous** (OA) meets at the Okeechobee Presbyterian Church, 312 N. Parrott Avenue on Fridays, 6 until 7 p.m. (Use 4th Street entrance.) Overeaters Anonymous is not a diet club. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively. For more information call Loretta at 863-763-7165 or 863-697-0206.

Restoration Ministries meets the second Friday of each month to help with addictions, depression, etc., at 7 p.m. For more information call Miss Kathy at 863-357-9083.

Saturday

Worship in Song at the Living Word of Faith Church of Okeechobee, 1902 S. Parrott Ave., on the second Saturday of the month beginning at 6 p.m. There is no charge to attend and all Christian

singers and musicians are welcome. For information, contact the church at 863-763-6869; Pastor Lee Minton at 863-763-3373; or, Sister Yvonne Price at 863-467-6657.

Teen Talk from 6 until 8 p.m. at the Jesus Holy Ghost Crusade Mission, 1401 N.E. Park St. Every teen is invited. Call 863-634-9340 or 863-357-6248, for information.

A.A. meeting from 8 until 9 p.m. at Okeechobee Presbyterian Church, 312 N. Parrott Ave. It will be a closed discussion.

The Society of Young Magicians will meet from 10 until 11 a.m. at the First United Methodist Church in Avon Park. For information, call Dick Laneau at 863-467-9540 or 727-345-4323.

Barnyard Buddies meets from 10 a.m. until noon at the County 4-H Extension office at 458 U.S. 98 N. Everyone who would like to be part of the Barnyard Buddies is invited, or you can sign up at the Okeechobee County 4-H Extension office Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. until 5 p.m. For information, call the extension office at 863-763-6469.

The Living Word of Faith, 1902 S. Parrott Ave., gospel music sing at 6 p.m. For information call 863-763-6869.

Sunday

A.A. meeting from 7:30 until 8:30 p.m. at the Church of Our Saviour, 200 N.W. Third St. It will be an open step meeting.

A.A. open 12 step meeting from 7:30 until 8:30 p.m. at the Church of Our Savior, 200 N.W. Third St.



Special to the Okeechobee News

Adopt a pet

There are lots of nice dogs and cats at the Okeechobee Humane Society, each waiting for their "forever" home. For more information, contact Humane Society Pet Rescue Florida, at 863-357-1104. To see more available animals go to PETFINDER.COM. Homes are also needed to "foster" animals who are waiting for a permanent adoptive home.

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