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## **State wildlife officials propose bounty on pythons in Everglades**

By [Craig Pittman](#), Times Staff Writer  
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IN THE EVERGLADES — State officials are pushing a plan to put a bounty on the heads of pythons in the Everglades. State wildlife commissioners met with Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and got his endorsement to pursue the idea.

"If we can send someone to the moon, we can figure out how to get rid of these snakes," said state wildlife Commissioner Ron Bergeron, who gave Salazar, Gov. Charlie Crist, and U.S. Sen Bill Nelson a ride on his airboat Thursday to tour the river of grass.

Crist also endorsed the idea. He said a bounty "may create a positive outcome for this problem."

Details remain to be worked out as to the amount of the bounty, how it would work. Another wildlife commissioner, Rodney Barreto, offered to put up \$10,000 of his own money to get the bounty hunting program started.

Barreto said federal officials have been reluctant to go along with the idea, but Salazar said it has worked out west and he's in favor of pursuing it.

The Burmese python, a non-native species, is considered one of the most damaging species to invade the Everglades, as one of the most elusive. Federal officials estimate there could be more than 150,000 of them throughout the river of grass. Worldwide attention was drawn to the problem in recent years when a park biologist found a python that had died while attempting to swallow an alligator. The pictures captured widespread attention.

Salazar and Nelson got to see a 16-foot python Thursday that park biologists had captured and brought out to show them.

<http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20090528/COLUMNIST/905281059/2127?Title=So-when-life-hands-you-a-state-full-of-pythons->

## **So, when life hands you a state full of pythons ...**

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Though wildlife biologist Meg Lowman has sounded the alarm about the invasion of Burmese pythons big enough to swallow tourists, maybe it doesn't have to be a bad thing.

I don't mean the tourist-swallowing part. That is best avoided. I'm against the ingestion of humans by reptiles, and especially by an invasive species that is supposed to live only in Asia, and is basically a 20-foot tube of muscle that can squeeze the life out of any breathing thing it coils around.

There hasn't actually been a fatal python attack in the wilds of Florida, as far as I know. So far, it is alligators that should worry. But Lowman and other biologists think the estimated Everglades population of 30,000 prolific pythons could become 30 million or so, and could inhabit wetlands all over the state, wreaking ecological havoc.

Some tourism promoters worry that people might then be so creeped out by thoughts of being slowly digested in a snake's belly that hikers, kayakers and recreational fishermen would stay away in droves. But isn't it best to see problems as opportunities?

When life gives you big, scary snakes, make snake pie!

Not literally, though I can imagine python steak as a Florida menu item to rival our frequently mispronounced conch fritters and our frequently misunderstood gator balls.

This particularly unwanted species could be a gold mine, because it is recognized as a threat to some of Florida's endangered species. That means killing pythons is good for the natural environment. What could be better?

The creep factor, properly exploited with ad campaigns, could attract far more visitors than it scares away. Some day, I predict, tourists won't want to leave Florida without an eco-tour glimpse of a chilling, gator-strangling invader as it slithers through the water hyacinths and punk trees. But the loathsome python will be even better news for the less mellow nature lovers who want guns and gore to be part of the fun.

Python hunting could rival sunbathing and golf as a tourism draw!

At last, Florida has a creature almost no one wants around, does not have big, soft-brown eyes, and appears as a hissing evil-doer even when it gets a role in a kid's movie. Florida could sell python hunting permits, guilt free! We'd get paid by people delighted to help curb our invasive snake problem, and even my most Bambi-hugging friends couldn't object.

I just hope Florida has enough pythons to keep the dollars pouring in.

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