



USARK Florida Python Press Release

For Immediate Release

For questions contact:

Andrew Wyatt

president@usark.org

www.usark.org

WILMINGTON, N.C. (July 2, 2009) - The United States Association of Reptile Keepers (USARK) was deeply saddened to learn of the tragic death of 2-year old Shaiunna Hare, who was killed in her home in Oxford, Florida Wednesday morning. Although authorities have not ruled out foul play, the Sumter County Sheriff's Office has initially reported the cause of death to be a 8-foot Burmese Python that was being kept in the home as a pet. The Sheriff's Office further reported that the family did not have the necessary permits to handle or keep the snake, nor did they have the required caging or follow proper safety protocols as mandated under Florida State law.

Florida Fish & Wildlife and the Florida Reptile Community have established strict guidelines for ownership of this type of animal within the state. Burmese Pythons are a 'Reptile of Concern' and fall under a statute requiring an annual permit. There are strict guidelines for secure caging, education and experience requirements and inspections. USARK is a strong advocate of handling and safety protocols and industry best operating procedures. We would like to recognize Florida Fish & Wildlife, Sumter County Sheriffs Dept. and Lake- Sumter EMS for handling this emotionally delicate situation in such an even-handed and professional manner.

"Although we still have a lot of questions, this is a tragedy that could have been prevented and that is truly heart wrenching", said USARK President Andrew Wyatt. "Ownership of any animal requires a great deal of responsibility, and reptiles are no different. USARK works with states across the nation to implement strong safeguards aimed at preventing situations like this from ever occurring", added Wyatt. "Unfortunately animal related tragedies are not uncommon. Dozens are killed every year by dogs and horses. This case is unusual because there is a snake involved; but even more so because of the apparent gross negligence and disregard for law. There are strong laws in place in Florida. If the laws had been followed this death would never have occurred. Our heart goes out to the family as they deal with this tragedy and wrestle with the knowledge that they played a major role in it."

The US Association of Reptile Keepers (USARK) is a science and education-based advocate for the responsible private ownership of, and trade in reptiles. Widely recognized as setting the standard for safe responsible reptile keeping nationwide, USARK endorses caging standards, sound husbandry, escape prevention protocols, and an integrated approach to vital conservation issues. Its goal is to facilitate cooperation between government agencies, the scientific community, and the private sector in order to produce policy proposals that will effectively address important husbandry and conservation issues. The health of these animals, public safety, and maintaining ecological integrity are its primary concerns.

Currently USARK has state legislation pending in North Carolina that would require secure caging standards,

safety & escape prevention protocols as well as penalties for negligence and violations.

Contributors: Andrew Wyatt (President USARK), Dennis Sargent (Fl. Reptile community) & Greg Graziani (Fl. Reptile community)

Note to Reptile Nation:

This Press release was sent to the Associated Press (AP) and various other media outlets.

The challenges we face at the federal and state level by those who would oppose responsible reptile ownership are merely one tragic event away from being enacted into law. Bad policy that could never stand on its own can easily be swept through legislatures and the U.S. Congress on a wave of emotion following the irresponsible actions of others.

USARK must stand firm on strong caging standards, sound husbandry, escape prevention protocols, and an integrated approach to vital conservation issues. In our view this is also the time to pursue a USARK Accreditation Program. Working with federal and state regulators to develop recognized and accepted standards and protocols insulates our community from having the terms of our existence dictated to us by those who would oppose reptile ownership altogether. It is also a way to establish USARK more firmly as the national standard bearer for the reptile-keeping community.

USARK has historically worked at the state level to implement strong laws for responsible ownership, thus a USARK Accreditation Program is merely internalizing those standards and working with states and federal regulators to raise the profile of our Program and its member participants.

We believe very strongly that this is the right approach, and the best way to respond to those who would use tragic events to demonize a responsible reptile-keeping community.