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## Gibbons: Sensationalism plays part in call for pet laws

Should people be allowed to keep dangerous animals?

Last week's headline in a Pittsburg newspaper read, "Police charge parents of girl killed by snake." Sounds like someone got bitten by a venomous snake, but the real story is more chilling. The 8-year-old girl was crushed to death in her parent's house by a 10-foot long, 70-pound Burmese python.

**Whit  
Gibbons**

Anyone would find this regrettable and, upon discovering the little girl had been left alone in the house with the big constrictor, most people would assume some kind of parental negligence. Not surprisingly, both mother and father now face charges ranging from involuntary manslaughter to child endangerment. But aside from obvious sociological issues, the case has another perspective. Should we have laws to prevent people from keeping animals capable of killing a person?

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But first, what is a Burmese python, and why was one roaming around a house? As giant constrictors, these Asian pythons reach lengths of more than 20 feet and can be a foot or more in diameter. A snake that big could eat a small deer or a child.

The instinctive behavior of a constrictor encountering what it perceives as a meal is to bite the potential prey and quickly throw boils around the body. Death results from suffocation. The Burmese python in question had escaped from its cage in the house and presumably interpreted the little girl as possible prey.

Opinions on the particular event were expressed on the listserv of Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation ([www.parplace.org](http://www.parplace.org)). PARC membership is open and free to anyone, but most listserv participants are herpetologists who support keeping snakes as pets.

However, one respondent stated, "as a mother of two young children, I don't believe in keeping anything that could eventually harm them. Burmese and reticulated pythons, large monitor lizards and venomous snakes should not be kept in homes with children."

This comment was not a popular one and provoked further commentary. Another mother said, "I stay home with my young child, but also have semi-large snakes -- red-tailed boa constrictors. If I should not have snakes because I have a child, then should I not have household cleaning products, electrical outlets, steak knives, power cords, medicine and a dog that is even larger than my snake? It's not what you keep that's the problem; being a responsible parent is what counts."

Another went into the concern held by many pet owners that keeping dangerous pets could become legislated, saying, "More people are killed by dogs, horses and even cats (disease related) each year than by all reptiles. Some organizations spend huge sums of money to eliminate the right for people to keep reptile pets. They ignore how many kids and adults are killed by other hobbies like biking and motorized sports (boating, snowmobiles, ATVs). We can't legislate for stupidity."

One person felt the sellers of pet snakes should share the blame. "Just as with gun dealers and bars, retailers should be held responsible in part for the ultimate outcome of injuries or deaths suffered at the hands of irresponsible consumers."

Dealers might work harder to verify the customer was actually capable of maintaining a dangerous item, whether it was a king cobra, Burmese python or Smith and Wesson .357."

Other aspects of the issue were discussed, but a thread of concern was that such an incident can become sensationalized and drive people to overreact to protect irresponsible people from themselves. Because of the burgeoning pet trade and popularity of Burmese pythons, tens of thousands are now pets around the country. Yet the number of accidental deaths attributed to this species of python is miniscule. Letting responsible people keep the animals they want, including dogs, cats, big or venomous snakes, and horses, is far healthier for society than imposing restrictions based on an isolated, highly sensationalized incident.

In this case, having a python in the house was not the problem. Instead, having the particular parents in the house was the big mistake. Let's keep legislation focused on people's behavior, not on the millions of animals, plants, and inanimate objects they could use to harm themselves or others.

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