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GOVERNOR

State of Louisiana

DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES
OFFICE OF WILDLIFE

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Public Comments Processing
Attn: RIN 1018-AV68
Division of Policy and Directives Management
US Fish and Wildlife service
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Dear Sirs:

This is the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' response to the USFWS request for information on snakes of the following genera: *Python* (pythons), *Boa* (boa constrictors) and *Eunectes* (anacondas) (Federal Register 73:5785; January 31, 2008).

Specifically, the USFWS wishes to obtain information regarding the following...

- 1) State regulations pertaining to the aforementioned snakes.
- 2) How many of those snakes are being produced for sale?
- 3) How many businesses sell these snakes?
- 4) How many businesses breed these snakes?
- 5) What are the annual sales for the snakes?
- 6) What number of species in those genera are permitted in the State?
- 7) What would it cost to eradicate individuals or populations of these snakes?
- 8) What are the costs of restoring populations of native species damaged by these snakes?
- 9) What state-listed species would be impacted by these snakes?
- 10) What species have already been impacted?

The answers to those questions for Louisiana follow. Information relative to numbers 2-5 are provided by Bill Watts, Westwego, representative of the Exotic Pet Owners Association in Louisiana.

- 1) Any of the snakes over 12 feet long are regulated through RS 76, Part XV, Subpart K:
 1. The importation and/or private possession of constrictor snakes in excess of twelve (12) feet, including but not limited to the following species *Apodora papuana* (Papuan python), *Liasis olivacea*, (Olive python), *Morelia spilota* (Carpet or Diamond python), *Morelia kinghorni* (Scrub python), *Morelia amethystina* (Amethystine python), *Python natalensis* (Southern African python), *Python sebae* (African Rock python), *Python molurus* (Indian or Burmese python), *Python reticulatus* (Reticulate python), any species of the genus *Boa* (Boa constrictors), and any species of the genus *Eunectes* (Anacondas), and venomous snakes, (hereinafter "restricted snakes") obtained in any

manner, shall be by permit issued by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries except for animals kept by animal sanctuaries, zoos, aquariums, wildlife research centers, scientific organizations, and medical research facilities as defined in the Animal Welfare Act as found in the United States Code Title 7, Chapter 54, 2132(e).

- 2) "Ball, Burmese and Reticulate pythons, and Boas, plus some Carpet Pythons, Womas and Black-headed Pythons are produced in Louisiana. Very few Anacondas if any are bred or sold here. It is cheaper to import the "B" grade [i.e., wild-caught, low value] stuff than to breed many species".
- 3) "Most pet shops and fish hobbyist stores, local and chains, sell Ball Pythons, probably several hundred annually, that were bought out-of-state. There are only about a half dozen shops around the state that sell Burmese or Reticulate pythons that were bought out-of-state. The number of estimated sales, collectively, for them is about 18 per year. About 150 Boas are sold annually".
- 4) "Only one professional breeder in Louisiana sells Burmese and Reticulate pythons, which are sold in the high price (over \$1,000 each) category, and they sell about 75 annually to out-of-state customers. There are a few hobbyist breeders that occasionally produce boas, and they are difficult to count -- perhaps about two dozen".
- 5) "Annual sales are over \$1,000,000, principally in high price Ball Pythons and some Burmese and Reticulate pythons, with 99% sold out-of-state. Very few Louisiana-bred pythons and boas are sold in-state. What few are sold come from the hobbyist breeders. Most that are sold here are imported hatchlings from Florida that are considered "B" grade (wild caught and imported). The sales of the in-state "B" grade stuff is about \$250,000 annually".
- 6) All species of *Python*, *Boa* and *Eunectes* are permitted except for the 9 species that can exceed 12 feet, which are regulated under RS 76.
- 7) Unknown.
- 8) Unknown
- 9) American Alligator.
- 10) None.

The USFWS also requests biological and other data pertaining to the snakes. The following points are pertinent:

The species involved. The basis for the FWS list of genera is curious, because other boas and pythons in three genera are reported to reach nearly 20 feet in length (*Epicrates*, *Liasis* and *Morelia*). The boa constrictor very rarely attains 12 feet in length. Of the ten species in the genus *Python*, six do not reach 8 feet in length.

Florida. South Florida has been, since at least the 1930s, a center for exotic animal importation and sales. Since the 1960s, it has been home continually to a half dozen enterprises that import the majority of constrictors and other reptiles into the U.S. There are 44 exotic species of reptiles now established in South Florida (compare with three in Louisiana [Mediterranean gecko, brown anole, brahmyny blind snake]), and nearly all are the result of released or escaped pets. It is likely that the establishment of Burmese Pythons around the Everglades is a result of repeated, perhaps intentional, introductions. Prohibiting interstate commerce will not solve the problem facing the S.F. Water Management District, as South Florida itself is the source of the snakes. Repeated release of other species of boas, pythons and anacondas in southern Florida have failed to establish other species, except that it is thought that Boa Constrictors may be breeding on one estate in Miami (Walter Meshaka, Pennsylvania State Museum, author of "The Exotic Amphibians and Reptiles of Florida", pers. comm.).

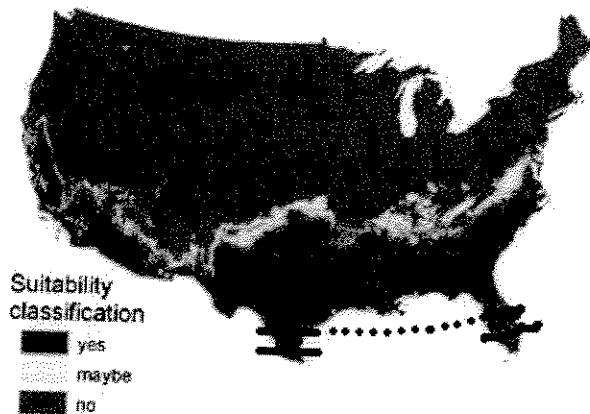
How many big constrictors? During 1970 and 1971, 46,720 of the proposed restricted species were imported into the U. S. for the pet trade (Busack 1974). Despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of the boas, pythons and anacondas have been, or are kept by private citizens of the U. S. for at least 50 years, they have never become established, or reproduced in the wild, except at the southern tip of Florida.

An example of the use and availability of large constrictors. On one Internet website, www.kingsnake.com, for February 25th and as of 0930 on February 26th, the Anacondas, Reticulate Pythons, and Burmese Pythons offered for sale were: six litters, four breeding pairs, and 33 grown individuals. Prices for individual snakes ranged from \$150 to \$10,000, and for pairs were from \$350 to \$3,500. These are not snakes that are going to be released into the wild.

Problems with limiting transport. If the aforementioned snakes are included in the Lacey Act, tens of thousands of current owners will be unable to move from one state to another with their snakes. They will be left with several options: 1) break the law, 2) release the snakes into the wild, 3) give the snakes away, 4) have a veterinarian euthanize them. Giving the snakes away is very difficult. The Bluebonnet Nature Center in Baton Rouge receives about 15-25 offers to donate large constrictors each year, all of which are refused (Claire Coco, Director, Bluebonnet Nature Center, pers. comm.).

Could they live in Louisiana? The USGS recently released a potential distribution map for the Burmese Python in the U.S., based on similarity of climate to the native range (Burma, Indochina, Southern China). They included the Indian Python in their analysis, which created a more generous range of possibilities because that species follows the Ganges and Indus Rivers into northern arid regions.

The Burmese python ranges as far north as 28°30' latitude in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, and to 26°30' southeastern China (Fujian Province) (Barker and Barker 2008). That northernmost latitude corresponds with mid-peninsular Florida (Orlando), and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The following map was provided by the USGS to indicate similarity of climate for the Indian and Burmese pythons. The upper set of black lines indicates the latitude that the Burmese Python reaches in its native range.



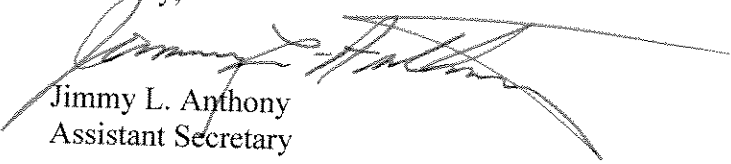
Conclusions. The Department believes that the establishment of Burmese Pythons in Louisiana would require a concerted and group effort to simultaneously release numbers of pythons, followed by monitoring and restocking due to die-offs after hard freezes. Thus, establishment is unlikely.

Literature

BARKER, D. and T. BARKER. 2008. The distribution of the Burmese Python, *Python molurus bivittatus*. Bulletin of the Chicago Herpetological Society 43:33-38.

BUSACK, S. 1974. Amphibians and reptiles imported into the United States. USDI Fish and Wildlife Service Wildlife Leaflet (506):1-36.

Sincerely,


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