Burmese pythons are one of the largest snake species in the world. An adult can reach 20 feet long and weigh over 200 pounds! They are not venomous. Instead, they kill by constricting, or squeezing. Today, huge Burmese pythons have invaded the Everglades and are killing off the native wildlife. (Everglades National Park is a large wilderness area in Florida.) The pythons are called "generalist apex predators." Generalist means that they eat many different animals. Their prey include mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and other reptiles (even alligators). Apex means that they are at the top of the food chain. In Asia, there are other animals that eat Burmese pythons. But in Florida, they have no natural predators (animals that eat the pythons). Without anyone that eats them, their population keeps growing.

The pythons are troublemakers in the Everglades. For example, populations of native species (animals that normally live in the Everglades) have decreased since the pythons moved in. The number of rabbits, raccoons, opossums, bobcats, and foxes is down by more than 90 percent. The pythons are also threatening several endangered species.

Because Burmese pythons are causing so much destruction, scientists are trying to track and capture them. Often they use traps. Dogs are specially trained to track the pythons’ scent, too. Scientists also tag pythons with radio transmitters, so they can learn more about their movement and habits.

When scientists catch the pythons, they euthanize (humanely kill) them. This allows them to learn what animals the snakes have eaten. One python had a 76-pound deer in its stomach. That would be like you eating an entire 25-pound Thanksgiving turkey--bones and feathers and all--in one sitting!

Where did the pythons come from? Scientists think they were people's pets that either escaped or were let loose. The habitat in the Everglades is perfect for the pythons. Scientists probably won't be able to eliminate the pythons completely. But they hope to minimize the damage they're doing.

Big snakes as pets? Big problem!

A baby python is only a foot or two long. But within a year, it can grow to over five feet. A big snake eats a lot and needs a big cage. Some people let their pet go if they can’t afford to care for it anymore. This is irresponsible and illegal. If you are thinking about getting a pet, do your research. How big will it get? What kind of food will it eat? How expensive is the food? What sort of cage will it need? And if you have a pet snake that you can no longer keep, find someone to adopt it--don't just let it loose.

Caption: Everyone is welcome in America--except these snakes.
Caption: The largest Burmese python found in the Everglades was 18.8 feet long. That's as long as three tall adult men lying head to foot!

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