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August 10, 2009

Mr. Rodney L. Barreto
Chairman
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Farris Bryant Building
620 S. Meridian Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600

Dear Chairman Barreto:

The Humane Society of the United States, the nation's largest animal protection organization with 11 million supporters including 740,000 in Florida, strongly supports the discussions reported to be underway to prohibit possession and sales of species designated as "reptiles of concern" as pets. These species include Burmese/Indian pythons, African rock pythons, Amethystine pythons, Reticulated pythons, Green anacondas, and Nile monitor lizards. Such a comprehensive approach is urgently needed to protect people and our natural resources.

The potential dangers were underscored when a two-year-old Florida girl was tragically killed by a Burmese python kept as a pet in her home on July 1. She was the fourth person killed in the United States by a pet python since 2006 -- two of them adults killed by reticulated pythons.

We share your concern about the proliferation of Burmese pythons in the Everglades and other parts of the state. From a small number released or escaped from the pet trade, these snakes now number in the tens of thousands and are probably ineradicable. The U.S. Geological Service says their potential range is vastly larger, including much of the southern one-third of the country and California. We agree with your statement in a recent letter to the editor that "We must do everything possible now to stop its spread into other areas."

Some have suggested that new policies be limited to restricting possession and trade of Burmese pythons. We think this would be a terrible mistake because the trade would move to other species. In fact, that trend is already evident. The number of Burmese pythons imported into the United States dropped from about 14,000 in 2002 to 1,500 in 2006. The trade shifted to animals bred in captivity and other species. Imports of reticulated pythons increased from about 5,000 to 13,000 and anacondas increased from about 1,200 to 11,000 over this period. These snakes can be deadly, and the discovery of an anaconda in Florida's Big Cypress Swamp in 2004 highlighted concerns about their invasive potential.

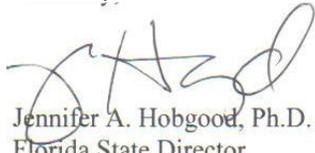
Including all reptiles of concern is essential, and any action should include all anacondas, not just green anacondas, which are currently the only anaconda species listed as a reptile of concern. Yellow anacondas, while smaller, also grow beyond 10 feet long, are capable of killing an adult or child, and if released would pose a serious threat to wildlife.

The removal of a few Burmese pythons by permit holders has captured headlines, but it is incongruous to send people to hunt the snakes without stopping the influx of the animals. Hunts are unlikely to make any dent in the problem because of the remarkable reproductive abilities of these snakes and their ability to blend into the environment. But with swift policy action now, we can prevent tens of thousands of large constricting snakes, just as dangerous as Burmese pythons, from entering the state.

We urge the FWC to look to take broader, proactive measures this year to stop the importation into the state, breeding, sale, and acquisition of all reptiles of concern, including all anacondas, before another child is injured or killed, and another invasive species becomes established in the wild. Once species become established, removing the animals is expensive and sometimes not achievable. If we do not address these problems now, we will have failed just as policy makers failed in not banning the trade in Burmese pythons a decade or two decades ago.

With your leadership, Florida will better protect its citizens and natural resources for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Jennifer A. Hobgood, Ph.D.
Florida State Director

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