

David G. Barker

VPI, Inc., PO Box 300, BOERNE, TX 78008 USA 830-537-5000 vpi@beecreek.net

29 April 2008

General Comment on:

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Fish and Wildlife Service
50 CFR Part 16
[FWS-R9-FHC-2008-0015; 94410-1342-0000-N3]
RIN 1018-AV68

Injurious Wildlife Species; Review of Information Concerning
Constrictor Snakes From Python, Boa, and Eunectes genera

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of inquiry.

ATTACHMENTS

Please note the following attachments that accompany this submission:

Scientific and Standard English names of Snakes in the Genera *Python*, *Boa* and *Eunectes*.

Comments on a flawed herpetological paper and an improper and damaging news release from a government agency.

Review: *An Ecological Risk Assessment of Nonnative Boas and Pythons as Potentially Invasive Species in the United States* by Robert Reed. 2005. Risk Analysis. 25(3): 753-766.

An Open Letter to Dr. Skip Snow.

Will they come in from the cold? Observations of large constrictors in cool and cold conditions.

Texas Minimum Temperatures in 2007.

Texas Freezing Temperatures.

A copy of BCHS with an article on the natural distribution of Burmese pythons

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

To whom it may concern:

I write in response to the above mentioned Notice of Inquiry posted by USF&W Service on 31 January 2008 in the Federal Register.

In introduction: I have 40 years of extensive experience in herpetology and in herpetoculture. My Master's degree is on the systematics of an ESA endangered species,

Crotalus willardi obscurus, and is published in *Biology of the Pitvipers*, Campbell and Brody, eds. (1992). I worked as a zoo keeper in the Dallas Zoo Department of Herpetology under Dr. James B. Murphy during 1975–1984. I was the Curator of Education at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, TX in 1988–1989.

Since 1990, my wife, Tracy Barker, and I have owned and managed Vida Preciosa International, Inc., better known as VPI. We have worked extensively with pythons and boas. Over the past 18 years we have maintained one of the largest and most diverse collections of pythons in the world. We have reproduced more species of pythons at VPI than at any other collection or institution in the world.

I have authored and co-authored numerous papers and books on the topic of pythons. Tracy and I wrote and photographed the well-reviewed *Pythons of the World, Vol I, Australia* (1994). We recently wrote and published the award-winning *Ball Pythons: The History, Natural History, Care, and Breeding* (2006); it is the longest and most detailed book ever published on the topic of a single snake species. I am particularly proud to have been a co-author with Harvey, Ammerman, and Chippindale (2000) of the paper that recognized the five species in the *Morelia amethystina* complex, and in which the Halmahera python, *Morelia tracyae*, is named in honor of my wife.

I here submit the following comments in answer to the questions posed in the Notice of Inquiry:

(1) What regulations does your State have pertaining to the use, transport, or production of *Python*, *Boa* and *Eunectes* genera?

The state of Texas has recently created a permit system for four species in the genus *Python* and for *Eunectes murinus*. The species in the genus *Python* are: *P. reticulatus*, *P. molurus*, *P. sebae*; and *P. natalensis*. Keepers wishing to maintain any number of these species must obtain a \$50 annual permit. The permit is issued by Texas Parks and Wildlife.

(2) How many species in the *Python*, *Boa* and *Eunectes* genera are currently in production for wholesale or retail sale, and in how many and which States?

Please note the attachment titled: Scientific and Standard English names of Snakes in the Genera *Python*, *Boa* and *Eunectes*.

Based on an internet survey, a review of advertising in *Reptiles Magazine*, and data provide by Kingsnake.com, there are snakes in the genera *Boa*, *Python* or *Eunectes* that are captive bred in every state where it is legal, which, I believe, is a total of 45 or 46 of the continental states.

All taxa listed in the NOI have been bred multiple times in the United States, with the possible exception of the northern yellow anaconda, *Eunectes deschauenseei*. The northern yellow anaconda is the sister species to the southern yellow anaconda, *Eunectes notaeus*; it is possible that there is confusion between the two species. The northern

yellow anaconda is not known to be in captivity in U.S. collections, but it is possible that the species may be here, may even be common, but misidentified as *Eunectes notaeus*.

US breeders regularly produce 9 of 10 species in the genus *Python*. So far as is reported, only *P. natalensis* is not currently being bred in the country.

All recognized subspecies of *Boa* are bred with regularity. The common boa, *Boa constrictor imperator*, is the most common boa subspecies in captivity and the most commonly bred. I am aware of two boa breeders that each have produced in excess of 1000 common boas in a single year. I would estimate that the number of common boas annually bred in the country exceeds 5000 animals.

Only a few breeders sell captive-born *Eunectes*; probably 100–200 green anacondas are born, and probably two-to-three times that many southern yellow anacondas are captive bred and born.

(3) How many businesses sell *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species?

So far as I know, there are no data that exist to answer this question with a discrete number. Including importers, distributors, national pet store franchises, individual local pet stores, reptile stores, incorporated commercial breeders, private individual breeders, and hobbyist breeders, my own estimate would be that there are ≥ 5000 businesses in the country that sell snakes in the genera *Python*, *Boa*, and *Eunectes*.

(4) How many businesses breed *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species?

That number is likely equal to or greater than my estimate in the previous question. Certainly many pet stores do not breed boas or pythons on the premises, so their number would be subtracted from the estimate in the previous question. However, there are many private owners of boas and pythons that may breed their animals for reasons other than commerce, or that only occasionally breed snakes in their care. Including the efforts and accomplishments of individual local pet stores, reptile stores, incorporated commercial breeders, private individual breeders, and hobbyist breeders, my own estimate would be that there are ≥ 5000 businesses and people in the country that breed snakes in the genera *Python*, *Boa*, and *Eunectes*.

(5) What are the annual sales for *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species?

Estimates only are possible for the total value nation wide. We sent the information for our business to be incorporated into the submission of PIJAC.

(6) Please provide the number of *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species, if any, permitted within each State.

In Texas, there are no limits to the numbers of boas or pythons that may be possessed. A permit is necessary to maintain the five largest species in the State, but it does not place a

limit on the number. The permit system went into effect on 1 April 2008, very recently, and there is no information on the total number of permits that have been applied for and issued.

(7) What would it cost to eradicate *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* individuals or populations, or similar species, if found?

In Texas it would cost the price of a 22 caliber bullet, or the cost of a cell phone call to an individual to come and retrieve the snake. My point is not to be funny or sarcastic.

The issue is that it is highly unlikely or impossible for any of the species in the genera *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* to become established as a nonnative invasive species in the State of Texas. To date, it has not happened, it is not rumored to have happened, and it is not projected to happen in the future.

To encounter any snake in the three genera would be, as stated in this question, to encounter an **individual** animal, not a member of an established population. The cost of eradicating an individual animal is minimal.

(8) What are the costs of implementing propagation, recovery, and restoration programs for native species that are affected by *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species, or similar snake species?

Because there is no established colony of feral snakes in the genera *Boa*, *Python*, or *Eunectes* in the State of Texas, there is no cost and no projected cost--ZERO.

(9) What State-listed species would be impacted by the introduction of *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species?

Because there is no established colony of feral snakes in the genera *Boa*, *Python*, or *Eunectes* in the State of Texas, nor is this projected to be even a possibility [see attachments]. There are no species of any sort that are in any way impacted by or projected to be impacted by any species in these three genera.

(10) What species have been impacted, and how, by *Python*, *Boa* or *Eunectes* species?

In the State of Texas—NONE.

In the unique case of southern Florida and the Everglades Greater Area, we request it to be entered into the record that mammalian and bird species in South Florida and the Keys currently believed to be threatened by the presence of Burmese pythons in that area ALL WERE LISTED AS THREATENED OR ENDANGERED LONG BEFORE PYTHONS CAME ALONG.

It may be the case that someday a Burmese python may eat the last Key Largo woodrat. However, that rodent, along with the Florida panther, the round-tailed muskrat, and all

others listed as threatened, all are primarily endangered by habitat loss, rampant development, habitat alteration, road mortality, feral housecats, pollution, and a host of other factors already contributing to the reduction in population numbers, and predicted eventual demise of those species.

It is our strong recommendation that if conservation agencies are concerned for the future of vulnerable listed species that now currently co-exist with Burmese pythons in South Florida, then ancillary captive populations of all species of concern should immediately be created.

Comments on Attachments Provided with this Submission:

1. **Scientific and Standard English names of Snakes in the Genera *Python*, *Boa* and *Eunectes*.** [excerpted from a paper in prep, submitted for clarification of the taxa indicated in the NOI posted by USF&W Service.]
2. A published paper: **Comments on a flawed herpetological paper and an improper and damaging news release from a government agency.** [a published review and critique of the ridiculous paper by Rodda et al. (2008) proposing that the southern third of the continental USA was climatically suitable for Burmese pythons, and of the results of the media release made by USGS.]
3. A published paper: **Review: *An Ecological Risk Assessment of Nonnative Boas and Pythons as Potentially Invasive Species in the United States* by Robert Reed. 2005. *Risk Analysis*. 25(3): 753-766.** [a published review of the paper by Reed (2005) that unsuccessfully attempts to quantify the risk of 23 taxa of boas and pythons to establish in the continental USA.]
4. **An Open Letter to Dr. Skip Snow.** [published online (www.vpi.com) requesting that Snow cease blaming unnamed and unnumbered “irresponsible” keepers and pet owners as the primary source of pythons in the Everglades unless evidence can be produced to verify the charges that have been repeatedly made and published by Snow.]
5. A paper in press: **Will they come in from the cold? Observations of large constrictors in cool and cold conditions.** [a paper accepted and in press, not to be distributed, that discusses important reasons why boas and pythons will not become established in the continental USA outside of south Florida.]
6. **Texas Minimum Temperatures in 2007.** [a map of winter temperatures submitted with “Will they come in from the cold?” as further evidence why snakes in the genera *Python*, *Boa*, and *Eunectes* cannot become established in Texas.]

7. **Texas Freezing Temperatures.** [a map of winter low temperatures averaged from 1948–2006, submitted with “Will they come in from the cold?” as further evidence why snakes in the genera *Python*, *Boa*, and *Eunectes* cannot become established in Texas.]
-

In conclusion, I request that the USF&W Service not place any boas or pythons on the Injurious Wildlife List of the Lacey Act. There is no defensible argument for this course of action.

If I can provide more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

—

David G. Barker