

Vida Preciosa International, Inc.

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An open letter to Dr. Ray W. Snow

2 April 2008

Dr. Ray W. Snow

Everglades National Park

Dear Dr. Snow,

We are writing in regard to the current problems and publicity generated by the growing presence of Burmese pythons in Everglades National Park and surrounding areas of South Florida. We strongly disagree with the public stance you have taken toward snake keepers across the nation.

Do you realize that every time you publicly frame the problem of Burmese pythons in the Everglades as being directly due to irresponsible snake keepers, you hammer a wedge that increases the divide between you and your work in the Everglades, and one of the largest groups of people who are inclined to support you? Every time you utter such a statement, you vilify and slander hundreds of thousands of responsible snake keepers, some living thousands of miles away and most of whom have never set foot in the Everglades.

Snake keepers everywhere have long considered the Everglades to be a park for reptiles, a refuge for alligators, indigos and cottonmouths. We all, even those of us who have never experienced the Everglades in person, take comfort in its existence. Many of us well know that the Everglades is a highly modified landscape where the Burmese python is only a new addition to a long list of established nonnative flora and fauna. Burmese pythons are only one of the more than two thousand exotic weeds, flowers, trees, algae, insects, arachnids, mollusks, fish, birds, reptiles and countless other taxa that have been found in the boundaries of the Everglades. But all of us, even those who couldn't find it on a map, take comfort in our simple understanding that the Everglades is a place for reptiles.

Yes, undoubtedly there exist irresponsible snake keepers, beginners and novices with little training who might release a nonnative snake into the wild. We know that each and every one of us, you included, started out as a beginner and novice. We also know from our personal histories and from 40 years watching the members of the snake community growing up around us that it is an extraordinarily rare circumstance for even beginners and novices to purposely release their animals.

Recently we heard the argument made that if keepers never had pythons in the first place, then this could not have happened. As evidenced by the USF&W Service Notice of Inquiry, and the outrageous statements of Florida Senator Nelson made on television while in your presence, it is apparent that some form of legislation is being considered to restrict private ownership of at least some species of boas and pythons. Such legislation would be an unfair and unwise action, comparable to saying that since a dog bit the postman, no law-abiding Americans anywhere should be able to own dogs. Is this the knee-jerk reaction you are advocating as a solution to this problem?

We American snake keepers are legitimate, law-abiding citizens, undoubtedly with a very small percentage of undesirables in our midst. We believe that is a fair description of any group, even invasive species biologists in the Everglades.

We are aware that in 2005 a \$21,000 grant was made to Florida International University by the South Florida Water Management District to study the genetics of Burmese pythons captured in the Everglades. The object was to determine if the population of established Burmese was founded by only a few animals, or by many. So far as we are able to determine, the results of that study were never released; at least they have not come to light. In view of your public statements, please release the results of that study to the public record.

Also, the time has come to make public the numbers of people that have been apprehended releasing pythons in Everglades National Park. How many people have been charged with this enforceable infraction of existing law? Based on such records as we are able to access, we cannot find a report of a single such infraction. Your continued allegations are baseless unless you can produce verifiable records of a level of this activity that would account for the immense population of pythons in the park. Yes, the snakes came from somewhere, but why presume that irresponsible pet owners purposely released their pythons in the park.

Using similar presumptive methodology, we could suggest that it was a biologist who seeded the park with Burmese pythons. Unlikely? Sure, but you can't deny that they are directly benefiting from the increase in attention and publicity. It has certainly been a fertile topic for publication for you and many others in the past five years. Careers and reputations will be made fighting pythons in the Everglades. It could be argued that biologists working in the Everglades have the most to gain from this, possibly the most-publicized ecological event in the short history of invasive species biology.

Isn't it possible that animal rights groups have seeded the park with Burmese pythons, knowing that the resulting mess would support their agenda? In that case, you certainly are playing their game. Also, isn't it possible that for the past 30 years employees of animal rescue and animal control agencies are removing exotic animals from urban situations and, rather than euthanizing them, releasing them in unpopulated and natural areas?

The damage inflicted by Hurricane Andrew to the animal owners, animal permit holders, and businesses in the Miami and Homestead area has never been fully reported, but we are told by survivors that countless animals of all types were released. Entire warehouses of animals were completely disappeared after the storm, blown straight into the Everglades. That was 1992, just far enough in the past for a small number of surviving pythons to have expanded into the numbers witnessed this year. Yes, we've heard the recently reevaluated estimates of an immense population in the park that is growing exponentially.

We would not imply that any of those conjectures is factual without strong evidence to support it. And we expect you, as a scientist and a professional, similarly to refrain from making any statement or inference framed as fact that is not based on sound evidence. As a government employee, any statement you make that incriminates the public should be true beyond any reasonable doubt. Surely you would agree that the 30-year history of Burmese pythons in the Everglades includes an unknown number of contributing factors. Isn't it a contributing factor that the Everglades is one of the most disturbed and damaged ecosystems in North America?

One of the authors of a recent, poorly researched article on the invasive dangers of Burmese pythons stated to us in correspondence that it is not important how Burmese pythons got to the Everglades, that it doesn't make any difference whether one unscrupulous individual seeded the

park, or hurricanes released animals when they destroyed homes and lives, or if irresponsible keepers let their pets go. What an extraordinarily narrow and self-serving point of view! Of course it is of the utmost importance—you personally have made it so.

Dr. Snow, we request that you reconsider and retract your statements of blame. They serve only to alienate a major national constituency that supports the existence of the Everglades. Your repeated speculation that the cause of this problem is “irresponsible pet owners” who traveled to the Everglades to release their unwanted snakes is logically the weakest and least likely of the possible explanations. Rather, it seems to be your directed intent to portray all snake keepers as irresponsible, thereby to weaken our position when protesting the unfair regulatory consequences that you apparently endorse. Of course, your statements also could be interpreted as your attempt to deflect any blame from yourself and the Park Service for watching without effective action for more than 20 years as Burmese pythons multiplied.

The national community of snake keepers is not responsible for the presence of Burmese pythons in the Everglades. We here question the motives and judgment of any trained scientist who would repeat inferences to the contrary. As we have stated, we all are predisposed to like the Everglades. Don't take lightly the good will of hundreds of thousands of snake keepers.

Sincerely,

David G. Barker Tracy M. Barker