

Pythons Invade the Florida Everglades

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When Tommy Owen, a tour guide in the Everglades National Park, saw the animal, he immediately went after it. Owen was giving a tour of Florida's famous national park wetlands. He and a group of tourists were floating in a boat through the shallow water that makes up the Everglades. One of the women in the boat he was steering saw a snake in the water. She got Tommy's attention and pointed the snake out to him. When Tommy saw the snake, he acted fast. He reached into the water and grabbed the animal by the head. He got a good grip and didn't let go. Tourists in the boat were worried when the snake wrapped itself around Tommy's arm. After several minutes, he got control of the animal and removed it from the water. The snake was a ten-foot-long Burmese python. It was a snake not native to Florida and, quite simply, it didn't belong there.

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The Florida Everglades teems with life. Situated at the southern end of the state, between Lake Okeechobee and the Gulf Coast, the Everglades is the largest wilderness east of the Mississippi River. Migratory and wading birds tiptoe through marshy grasslands. Orchids and ferns dot the hardwood forests. Alligators lounge in the shallows and on muddy riverbanks. Mangrove leaves rustle in the wind as the brackish water laps at their roots.

All of this life is made possible by the presence of water. The Everglades is a natural region of subtropical wetlands. Water flows from the Kissimmee River into the wide, shallow Lake Okeechobee. From there the lake drains south, into the Everglades marsh and the Florida

flats. The Everglades is sometimes called the “River of Grass” after a book of the same name by author Marjory Stoneman Douglas. The phrase illustrates the fact that the Everglades is basically a very wide and shallow river.

The Florida Everglades once covered 11,000 square miles across the southern end of the state. Wetlands are an important ecosystem. For centuries, however, humans thought of wetlands as unhygienic swamps. Draining the Everglades was suggested in the late 19th century. As soon as Florida became a state in 1845, its legislature asked permission from Congress to drain the Everglades. Canals were dug to remove or redirect the water. Land that dried out was reclaimed for agriculture or building purposes. This reclamation allowed for significant development in south Florida. Sugar farmers moved into the area and prospered. The city of Miami took root.

Approximately 50% of the Everglades was reclaimed for agricultural or urban use. Much of the northern area was polluted with phosphorus. This phosphorus was agricultural runoff from the farms near the Everglades.

Concerned Floridians began advocating for saving the area in the 1930s. Their efforts paid off in 1947 when Congress created the Everglades National Park. Starting in the late 1970s, environmental concerns at both the national and international levels refocused attention on the Everglades. The area was designated as one of the world’s most important wetland areas.

Since then efforts have been underway to safeguard the park and return the Everglades to health. Water levels are monitored, as are nutrient levels in both water and soil samples.

Much of the conservation project was designed to reverse-engineer the canal system that was built in the 19th and mid-20th centuries. By the mid-2010s, ecological indicators showed some improvements. For example, the crayfish population was up. Wading and migratory birds improved their nesting habits.

Despite conservation efforts, the Everglades ecosystem began facing another threat in the early 2000s.

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Burmese pythons were breeding in the Everglades, and they reached numbers that designated them as an invasive species. They were classified as an invasive species when their population swelled to a large size.

Pythons are eating machines. They can eat animals of different sizes, from mice to deer. They especially enjoy dining on small mammals and birds. Studies have shown that since the appearance of Burmese pythons in the Everglades, the numbers of small mammals in the area dropped significantly. This population loss was not observed in areas where the Burmese python had not established itself.

The Burmese python is native to tropical and subtropical zones in Southeast Asia. In their native habitat, Burmese pythons are nocturnal carnivores. When they live close to human habitations, Burmese pythons eat rats, mice, and rabbits that are attracted to human dwellings and farms. They can also eat small farm animals like chickens. When they live away from human habitations, Burmese pythons eat birds and small wild mammals. The Burmese python is a solitary animal. It kills by constricting its body around its prey. Python eggs and hatchlings are a food source for other animals. In the wild, Burmese pythons grow to be on average 12 feet long. (Habitat loss and the exotic pet trade in Asia are depleting the Burmese python's numbers in the Asian wild.)

The first Burmese python was found in the Florida Everglades in 1979. It's presumed the animal was originally kept as a pet and then released by its owner. It was removed, but that wasn't the last of Burmese pythons in south Florida. It's thought that numerous Burmese pythons escaped pet stores and cages damaged in Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Since then, the numbers of Burmese pythons grew at a fast rate. The escaped Burmese pythons weren't the only cause of the most recent population increase of Burmese pythons.

In the United States the Burmese python was a popular exotic pet. Docile and beautifully patterned in brown and gold diamond shapes, these snakes could be purchased at pet stores or reptile shows. Owners kept them in cages or tanks and fed them rats or mice. Most people bought Burmese pythons when they were small. Burmese pythons grow very quickly. For many pet owners, the pet Burmese pythons became too big to manage. So they released them into the wild.

When the Burmese python was designated as an invasive species, many agencies and individuals began trying to put a stop to the python invasion. The National Park Service started a program to study these animals in the Florida Everglades. Park Service scientists implanted tracking devices into seventeen large pythons that were later re-released into the wild. They provided scientists with information regarding python behavior.

In January 2013 to February 2013, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission ran a contest called the 2013 Python Challenge. The Commission issued permits to hunt the snakes within state wildlife-managed areas of the Everglades. Sixty-eight Burmese pythons were captured.

Later in 2013, Jason Leon was driving in a rural area near Florida City when he spotted a Burmese python's head protruding from the brush. The man was a biologist, and he was familiar with pythons. He approached the snake and pulled it out of the bush. The animal was bigger than he expected. After a struggle with the animal, Leon killed it. The Burmese python was 128 pounds and longer than 18 feet. Leon contacted the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which agreed to pick up and examine the snake. The snake was found to be the largest ever in the state of Florida.

The state later issued a statement:

Jason Leon's nighttime sighting and capture of a Burmese python of more than 18 feet in length is a notable accomplishment that set a Florida record. The Florida Wildlife Commission is grateful to him both for safely removing such a large Burmese python, and for reporting its capture.

Despite these efforts, the population of Burmese pythons continued to grow. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission held another contest in 2016 called the 2016 Python Challenge.