

Florida python hunt yielding relatively few snakes

February 11 2013, by Ben Wolford

Fewer than 48 hours remain in Florida's Python Challenge, and the snake kill count is - wait for it - 50. Same as it was Tuesday.

State wildlife officials are calling the invasive-snake bounty hunt a success, but for all the pomp and urgency, some hunters are not pleased.

"I don't feel the epidemic is as bad as they're saying," said Mike Singleton, 39, of Tampa, who participated in the hunt the first weekend, but became disillusioned and quit.

By the numbers, it doesn't sound good. At least 1,563 hunters registered to participate in the contest, which lasted a month. The number of [Burmese pythons](#) in the Everglades is said to be in the hundreds of thousands.

One participant, Ruben Ramirez, 40, of Kendall, a Miami suburb, said he and a friend hunted most of the days and sometimes covered 20 miles a day.

So where are all the snakes? From interviews with experts and seasoned hunters, a few theories emerge about the low [death toll](#), each probably true.

For one, the [average temperature](#) during the [Python](#) Challenge approached 80 degrees, and snakes didn't need to find sunlight out in the open, experts said.

But more important, hunting snakes isn't like hunting buffalo on the plain.

"Everybody thought they were going to come out here and be stumbling across pythons," said Ramirez, who claims he has hunted every day but three. He didn't deny a rumor that he's probably winning the contest, but he wouldn't say how many pythons have died by his hand.

"A lot of people got frustrated real quick," he said. "Two, three days in the blazing sun. The guys who kept at it were walking 20 miles a day. It's not a walk in the park. I've lost, like, 20 pounds from before it started. My pants are falling down."

Not only is snake hunting hard work, some say these hunters have no idea what they're doing.

On Thursday, two twenty-something hunters from Tennessee who had been sleeping in their car got lost and called for help. When a Broward County search helicopter found them 15 miles from the nearest civilization, they were disoriented, overheated and dehydrated.

Kenneth L. Krysko is a snake researcher at the University of Florida's Museum of Natural History, which, unlike the university itself, was unaffiliated with the Python Challenge. Krysko opposed the bounty as an extermination method on the grounds that armed amateurs ought not roam the Everglades unsupervised.

"The reason people aren't catching that many is they don't have a clue where to look," he said. "Look at all the yahoos coming down here."

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which sponsored the Python Challenge to raise awareness of invasive species and to put a dent in the population, says the contest accomplished those

goals and more.

"This is the largest sample of pythons in Florida for such a short period of time," FWC spokeswoman Carli Segelson said.

The data gleaned from such a sample is valuable for hatching new population-control plans, she said.

There have been rumors of cheating, drunkenness and target practice against native animals, including at least one turtle, say reptile enthusiasts. One hunter said he declined offers from two friends to give him pythons to turn in for the contest. Segelson said she hasn't seen evidence of any of this.

The FWC has never released an estimate on the Everglades python population. It's impossible to count in such remote areas, experts agree. So any number is purely speculation.

Including this one: "There may be as many as 150,000 of these snakes just in the Everglades National Park," Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said last month at Big Cypress National Preserve.

This kind of talk benefits politicians and grant-funded researchers who stand to gain from a perception of rampant Southeast Asian snakes devouring furry native critters, some say. You hear this argument loudest from those in the reptile trade who fear increased pet regulation.

And even if there were hordes of pythons in Everglades National Park, the contestants were not allowed to hunt there. Hunters have griped about that as another possible reason the kill count was only 50.

Shawn Heflick, 44, of Palm Bay, was the first person in Florida to hold a permit to hunt pythons after he began work with the FWC and the

National Park Service on a python eradication program in 2009. That's when people first tossed around the idea of a bounty hunt. Subsequently, Heflick and two colleagues co-hosted the National Geographic Wild TV show "Python Hunters."

Yet he believes officials are inflating the [snake](#) emergency.

"You've got individuals who clearly benefit from the idea of there being a huge number of pythons out there," he said, adding that it's distracting from other, more serious, problems - like feral cats.

Homeless felines kill billions of native songbirds and rodents. The FWC acknowledges this on its website and includes a picture of an adorable housecat. Its picture of the Burmese python has a target on its head.

Segelson said the Python Challenge has spurred interest in other kinds of invasive species problems.

"We're pleased with the amount of attention (the Python Challenge) has received," she said.

When the contest's award ceremony is finished on Feb. 16 and the 2013 Python Challenge is history, Segelson says the FWC will send out a questionnaire to find out how hard most hunters actually tried. It's possible hundreds registered but never put in the time.

Ultimately, no one really expected truckloads of carcasses. But everyone was hoping.

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