

Super Bowl python hunt 'glorifies' slaughter of snakes, should be canceled, PETA says

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People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) wants the Miami Super Bowl Host Committee to cancel the 2020 Python Bowl, saying the hunt glorifies "the slaughter of snakes."

In a letter to Rodney Barreto, chair of the Host Committee, and to all

committee members, PETA President Ingrid Newkirk said the event could potentially upset animal-friendly football fans because it's disrespectful to the Burmese pythons, which are an invasive species. She also said that footballs made of python skin, which the committee is planning to produce on a small scale as gifts to guests, "trivialize the animals' deaths."

"The NFL should play no part in Florida's war on wildlife. When inexperienced and untrained individuals go barging about in forests and swamps on a macho mission to kill, things don't end well," Newkirk wrote in the letter.

Burmese pythons are among the biggest threats to the Everglades as they have no local predators and easily permeate the marshes, devouring small mammals, wading bird eggs and even alligators. Marsh rabbits, once ubiquitous inside Everglades National Park, are nowhere to be seen now.

Pythons are hard to find and reproduce very successfully in South Florida's fragile ecosystem, with one female laying up to 100 eggs a year. There isn't a firm estimate on their numbers, but scientists speculate there could be as many as 300,000.

State wildlife managers struggled for years to contain the invasive reptiles with traps and poisoned prey. It didn't work. Recently, the South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission have offered incentives for snake hunters, paying people for their catch. More than 3,000 snakes have been removed by the state-sponsored programs since they started in 2017.

Wildlife managers announced earlier this month they wanted to use the country's biggest sports event to draw attention to the python issue. As part of promoting the snake hunt, the state had a football made from

python skin, which Gov. Ron DeSantis posed with while pitching the event, scheduled to run Jan. 10-19. The challenge will award cash prizes and two all-terrain vehicles to hunters who catch the biggest snakes.

According to the Challenge website, hunters can join as a rookie or a pro, with separate prizes awarded to each category. All participants must register and are required to take a free online training course and pass an online test. It takes about 30 minutes to complete the online training, the website says.

Barreto said the host committee was surprised at PETA's complaints, considering the animal rights organization does recognize the need to remove the invasive species from the Everglades.

In a letter to committee members, Barreto said the Burmese python is "an environmental crisis" and that the killing of the invasive snake is an unfortunate but necessary action.

"We have great respect for these animals, but they must be removed to give native animals a chance at survival," he said.

Committee members include Eric Silagy, Florida Power & Light's CEO, and Jose Mas, the MasTec CEO who is an investor in the Inter Miami CF Stadium with David Beckham

In response to PETA's complaint about the football made of python skin, Barreto reminded the committee members that footballs are made from cowhide, and that PETA doesn't seem to think that is disrespectful to cows. He said the python football is a celebration of the beauty of the python, and a way to use the animal once it's dead.

"We believe using a leftover python skin to create goods truly honors the snake that only had to be killed for the greater purpose of saving the

native wildlife of the Everglades," he said.

In an emailed response to questions, PETA's Newkirk said she is concerned with the fate of captured animals during the Python Challenge, when amateurs and untrained hunters may not have the knowledge to kill a [python](#) humanely. In PETA's opinion, the snakes should be killed using methods approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association, and by professionals who have proper training on those methods. "Not by any yahoo who wants to take a selfie," she said.

The veterinary association's preferred techniques for killing reptiles include gunshot, double pithing (severing the spinal cord and destroying the brain), blunt trauma to the brain followed by double pithing to confirm death, among others, according to the Association's 2019 Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals.

In his letter, Barreto said the FWC and the district provide sufficient training on how pythons should be killed humanely.

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