

AND invasive SPECIES



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breaking a tight grip



Every morning, two Indian tribesmen in t-shirts and long trousers, leave their dwellings in southern Florida and head into the Everglades to hunt for some of the world's biggest snakes. Masi Sadaiyan and Vadivel Gopal, members of the once-nomadic Irula tribe, are armed with crowbars and machetes. Wearing fleece jackets and baseball caps, they slash and wade their way through the largest subtropical wilderness in the world to hunt down Burmese pythons.

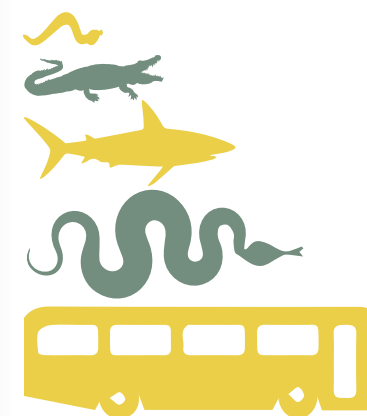
A Growing Threat

The non-native snakes, which escaped into the wild in Florida or were released as pets, pose the biggest threat to the small mammal population of the national park. They also eat birds, alligators and deer. In 2005, a Burmese python tried to swallow an alligator and exploded in the park, leaving both the predators dead.

The Invasive Hunt

Ever since the pythons were spotted in the wild more than two decades ago, authorities have tried everything to catch the elusive snakes in the marshes, but with limited success. They

have used pythons (called Judas snakes) to find other pythons during the mating season, asked people to turn in their pet snakes, poisoned prey, and even encouraged people to hunt them for a cash prize. Last year, some 1,000 hunters participated in a competitive month-long Burmese python hunt to rid the wetland of the invasive species, and caught 106 snakes. By comparison, in the past four weeks, the two 50-something tribesmen from India have caught 27 pythons. Pythons that are caught are later put down.



Python Proportion

The Burmese Python is the largest reptile on Earth. The average python can grow to an alarming 20 feet, which is only 10 feet short of a school bus.

India is home to 50 species of venomous snake and bites kill some 46,000 people a year, accounting for nearly half the snake-bite deaths in the world.

The Irulas

"They can see pythons when they are covered by grass. All they need is a glint of snake and they pounce. The rest of us are usually wondering where the snake is. Next thing we see they are holding it." The Miami Herald marvelled at the snake hunting skills of the Irulas, whom herpetologist Rom Whitaker describes as the "best snake catchers" in the world. The newspaper reported that the Irulas appeared to have "mysterious" tracking techniques.

The Irulas believe the boulders and high grasses that line the levees are more lucrative hunting grounds. When the going gets slow, everyone must stop to squat for a quick song of prayer, usually an ancient invocation mixed with an ad lib about pythons or the weather. Their biggest catch has been a 16ft-long female python in an abandoned missile base. Two men cut the roots that blocked the entrance to the bunker, pried open a door, went inside, poked the snake, broke through a concrete shaft and hauled out the 75kg (165lb) reptile.

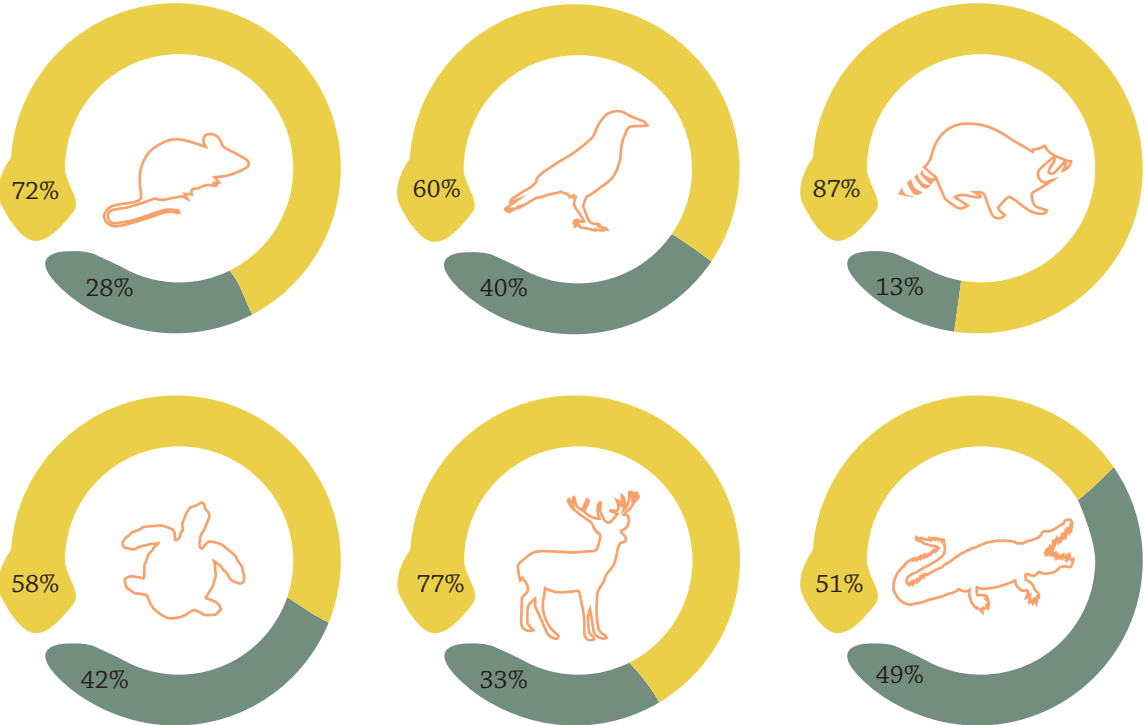
The Mission

For the past month, the two men, who have travelled around the world to catch snakes, have been living in the home of Joe Wasilewski, a well-known herpetologist. Their two months of work is funded by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

After an oatmeal breakfast, they are driven to work. Sometimes they go out after dark. In the early days, they survived on Trinidadian Indian food, but since then they have tried hotdogs and burgers and watched an NFL game.

"All that they say so far is that they like being in America and want to catch lots of pythons." Ms. Lenin said.

The Irulas have a government licence to catch 8,300 snakes in India every year. A co-operative of Irula snake catchers have 370 members, including 122 women. Venom is extracted from each snake. There are more than 850 poisonous snakes in the co-operative farm.



Gripping Numbers

The correlation between the population of pythons and their prey before and after their arrival to the everglades is drastic.

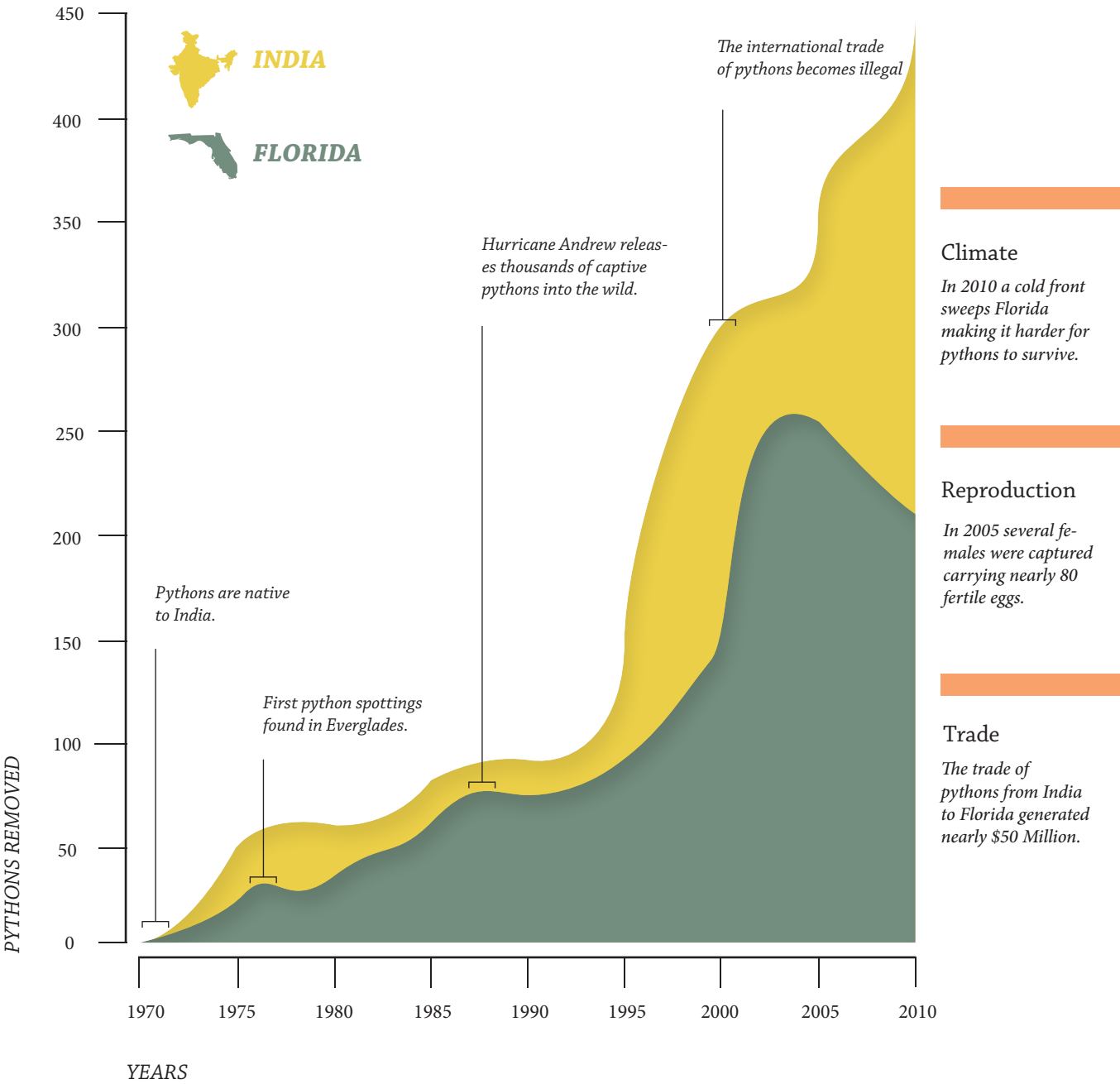
Lethal Business

The Irulas poached snake and lizard for their skins until the trade was outlawed in 1972. A decade later, the Irulas formed a co-operative community near the southern city of Chennai and switched to catching poisonous snakes - mainly cobras, kraits and vipers - to extract and sell venom. The venom is now sold to seven laboratories, who manufacture most of India's anti-snake venom serum. Last year, the co-operative's 370 members, including 122 women, sold snake venom worth 30 million rupees (\$446,500; £357,900), up from a mere

6,000 rupees in 1982. They have a government licence to catch 8,300 snakes every year - each snake is released in the wild after four extractions in a month, but demand they are allowed to catch three times as many. After all, a gram of cobra venom sells at 23,000 rupees today, nearly eight times as much as the price in 1983. An Irula snake-catcher earns some 8,000 rupees every month, apart from other health and pension benefits.

BEFORE (1974-2000)
AFTER (2001-2017)

Research conducted by National Park Services



Pythons Removed from Habitats Over the Years

Researchers believe a private reptile-breeding facility in the Everglades damaged during Hurricane Andrew in 1992 helped the snakes to break free and multiply in the wild. In addition, officials said, irresponsible pet owners have abandoned their snakes once they grow too large and unruly for the home. While more than 2,000 pythons have been removed from the area since 2002, the lack of predators has allowed the population to swell to over 300,000.

Article for NBC News, written by Rebecca Davis