

# Big Snakes

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Reading the article about the affectionate giant Burmese python, lucky enough to find a second loving home, (*Extraordinary experiences with an adult female python - Python molurus bivittatus* [no.2 issue of *Litteratura Serpentiū*]), has inspired me to take a further look at the issue of big snakes. Apart from the odd news item like "Snake Bites Buttock of Pregnant Woman!" or something such as the less bizarre though equally alarming story of a 19-year old New York youth being strangled to death by a large Burmese python, I have, in my wanderings on the Internet and reptile-related newsgroup on Usenet - "rec.pets.herp" - often encountered articles and discussion concerning these 'heavy' creatures.

The Burmese Python is by far the most popular of the giant snakes with both herpetoculturalists and the inexperienced first time buyer who falls for and impulsively buys "that charming little snake in the pet shop." This is hardly surprising as they seem to be the most prolific breeders, easy to maintain (at first) and feed, and what's more, they are really beautiful as baby snakes and noted for their easy dispositions. In the above-mentioned article there is a reference to a breeder that produces 180 young Burmese pythons a year. Whether he is double-clutching or has a large breeder stock, he obviously finds a market for them - as do countless others, especially in the US where Burmese pythons are amongst the cheapest of snakes.

With all these potential 6 meter, 125 kg snakes about, giant pythons should be commonplace but somehow they do not seem to be. Which leads me to wonder what becomes of all those baby Burmese. Unfortunately the picture one gets from the news-

group is that most end up in 'adoption' programmes, die from lack of adequate care or are put down. For such a relatively easy snake to maintain, it therefore seems obvious the vast majority are ending up with ill-informed and inexperienced owners. I will quote from the newsgroup to give you an idea of just how uninformed a large percentage of the owners of these soon-to-be giant (and potentially dangerous) snakes are:

•My young Burmese Python's eyes have gotten cloudy and his skin is flaky. Anyone know what might be the problem?

•I have a very healthy python that is definitely getting too big for my tastes. It is about five feet in length. About how much would one get for one of those these days? Any info would be appreciated.

•How large can the prey be for a 16' Burmese? Should the German Shepherd be worried? Also, are there any large snakes over 12' (anaconda's., pythons) that don't have teeth and are non-venomous?

•I have a Male 7 - 8 Foot Burmese Python of normal colouring that I need to find a good home for. I have posted this before in here and this is my LAST shot BEFORE I have to put him to sleep.

It seems obvious that pet shops are partly to blame as I don't think half as many Burmese pythons would be sold if customers were first made fully aware of what awaited them five years down the line. They seem to be the classic "loveable puppies - deserted dogs." The irony is that these snakes are sold on a large scale through channels (petshops) that experienced snake keepers wouldn't use as they are more likely to buy a snake from a reliable breeder or reptile specialists than a pet shop. This means that the snakes sold through pet shops are almost guaranteed to fall into the 'wrong'

hands. Of course, who is to say who the “wrong” person is and I’m sure a lot of novice Burmese owners have developed a keen interest in and knowledge of snakes as their animal grows, but I get the impression that there is a profit-driven attempt to supply this ignorant demand for charming baby snakes, knowing full well that there may be disastrous consequences for the snakes later on.

Thankfully not all large Burmese pythons are being ‘dumped’ and as one poster suggests, there may even be a lot more fully grown giants out there than one would imagine:

•You know, the local zoo (Bronx) claims to have the largest snake in America, but as many Burmese Pythons as are sold through the pet trade, and as easy as Burmese Pythons are to keep, and given that owning huge Pythons is against the law in many areas, I suspect there are MANY very large Retics, Anacondas, Burmese, African Rocks, etc. around that no one is aware of. I had a friend years ago who had a good friend who lived in a NYC apartment with a 22 foot retic that no one knew about. I bet that’s common.

If this is in fact common, its not the kind of thing one tells one’s neighbour about! The general public will never get used to the idea of, let alone accept, large snakes and it is therefore not surprising that the press has a field-day when they make the news - often overdramatising and sensationalising stories. In an open letter to emergency services in the US on how to deal with bite/constriction situations (<http://www.sonic.net/~melissk/headless.html>), Melissa Kaplan ascertained that most calls to emergency response agencies, and therefore the ones that are more likely to get media coverage, were from or involved people who had had no prior experience with snakes

and were not connected with any local herpetological society.

In a paper, “Guidelines For The Keeping Of Large Constrictors”, the American Federation of Herpetoculturists (AFH), attempts to outline safe and responsible care practises for these snakes. Their two most important guidelines for avoiding accidents are:

- 1) any snake over 3 meters should only be handled when two or more people are present,
- 2) never offer food by hand or handle food and then a hungry snake.

The document goes on to mention just how rare accidents actually are and cites a statistic which placed deaths in the US from large constrictors over a ten year period (1978-1988) at a figure of four; three from *Python reticulatus* and one from *Python molurus.bivittatus*. The document makes the inevitable comparison with more accepted yet far more ‘dangerous’ pets and past-times. Horses are apparently one of the most dangerous domestic animals in the US; there are 10 to 15 dog-related deaths a year; firearms, automobiles and electrical appliances lead to even greater numbers of fatalities, yet prejudice has led authorities in various states in the US to legislate against the keeping of large snakes.

The 14-year old Colorado boy that was killed by the family’s free-roaming pet python while he lay sleeping and the death of Grant Williams, age 19, by an attack from his Burmese python in his Bronx, New York apartment are certainly shocking and we have to accept that for the general public there is an additional ‘horror’ factor where snakes are concerned and it is not surprising that people react negatively to the concept of keeping giant snakes. The fact that Grant Williams had just handled a chicken before picking up his hungry Burmese

is an irrelevant detail that the general public does not remember. Incidents like the San Diego couple who were asleep in their bed when their hungry pet Burmese python crawled in and bit the (pregnant) woman on the buttock and then proceeded to wrap itself around her expectant belly are so bizarre as to do 'wonders' for public opinion. Apparently all attempts to get the snake to release failed till eventually its head was sawn off by emergency workers with a hack-saw! Though blinding ignorance was at the heart of this ordeal, the story got world-wide coverage and many foreign magazines ran it - netting a small fortune, I imagine, for the poor 'victims'.

It seems the success of captive breeding Burmese pythons is more than adequately meeting the demand for live snakes, consequently reducing pressure on wild populations if, at least, only from the pet trade - the skin trade and habitat destruction are another story. It seems a little paradoxical too that this sub-species of the Indian python (*Python molurus molurus*), which is an endangered species listed in appendix I of CITES should be flourishing in abundance in cages throughout the USA and Europe.

I will conclude with a rather amusing exchange from the newsgroup "rec.pets.herp", basically saying THINK before you buy one of these little snakes:

•I currently have two boas and am getting the urge for another snake. Today I was at my local petshop and low and behold what's delivered but a baby albino Burmese python. The pattern is a bit darker than usual for albinos which actually makes this particular snake even more attractive. I wound up holding it for 10-15 min seems healthy (though it needs a meal and was slightly dehydrated on arrival from the supplier) and to make matters better - er, worse the manager of the

store, who I know a little bit, says he'll knock the price down from 200 to 150\$. I told him I'd be back in a few days to see it eat, Burmese, I doubt it's a problem, and let it get rehydrated and look at it again.

So anyway my self-control is waning, talk me out of it. Tell me this snake will eat my children. That it's Satan incarnate and will grow up to be 20ft of nasty. Bring me back to my sanity. I know there are some of you out there who know what I mean.

Bob

•I'll take a whack at it. I recently sold my albino female, who was gorgeous and very, very tame. She was also about 7 feet and already getting hard to handle. She \*loved\* to be out of the cage, but what games can you play with a 7 foot pal? Jump rope??

They are beautiful snakes. They are also very large, very strong, and very voracious. This snake will be expensive to feed and expensive to house, and ultimately unhandleable, no matter how tame, because of sheer size. Of course, when you don't handle them, they can get nippy when you do have to handle them. A bite from a big guy can put you in the emergency room, or at least make you see God. We get many, many big Burmese for adoption at my herp society. Take a measuring tape and lay 16 feet of it on the floor and look at how big that really is. It is damn big. Because they are heavy snakes, too, try lifting a 100 lb. sack of something. That will be your baby. Look at your house. You will ultimately need a cage at least 10-12' X 4'. Do you have that kind of space? Do you want an animal that will have to be fed rabbits/chickens? Think really hard about the reality of it. Go to a store that has a full grown animal, stare at it for a while, ask to handle it. They are a hell of a lot of work. If you are determined, why not adopt from a local herp society? There are Burmese that desperately need good homes. I am

currently caring for an 8-9 footer with horrible rat bites (and I am having trouble handling it by myself). If you really want to do this to yourself, consider giving a cast-off animal a good home. Also, the reason the shop owner is so willing to come down to \$150 is that you are getting ripped. You can easily get a robust, healthy hatchling for \$75 from a well known breeder, and then you won't need to worry about health issues. Think, think, think, then think again. The fact that you are having second (and third) thoughts is good. Listen to your doubts. There are many, many beautiful snakes in smaller sizes that will be much more enjoyable experiences.

Oh, and by the way, this snake will eat your children. It's Satan incarnate and will grow up to be 20ft. of nasty.  
Leslie

## LITERATURE

- "AFH Guidelines For The Keeping Of Large Constrictors" ([http://www.reg.uci.edu...ICE/AFH/g\\_constr.html](http://www.reg.uci.edu...ICE/AFH/g_constr.html))
- "Open Letter to Emergency Responders to Biting Snake Calls" (<http://www.sonic.net/~melissk/beadless.html>)
- "Burmese Python" - a care sheet on, Malissa Kaplin (<http://www.sonic.net/~melissk/burm.html>)
- Various quotes taken from the Usenet newsgroup: "rec.pets.herp".