

# THE KEEPING OF LARGE PYTHONS REALITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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In 1993 large pythons were the subject of many a news story last due to the fact that there were at least two deaths directly attributable to them. Tragically, the deaths would not have happened had the owners of these snakes kept them safely, and responsibly, contained. The following article, by David Chiszar, Hobart M. Smith, Albert Petkus and Joseph Dougherty, was published in the Bulletin of the Chicago Herpetological Society, and represents the first clear, and accurate, account of the death that occurred July 1993

## **A Fatal Attack on a Teenage Boy by a Captive Burmese Python (*Python molurus bivittatus*) in Colorado.**

*The recent Colorado case of a human death caused by a Burmese python (*Python molurus bivittatus*; 20 July 1993) resulted in considerable sensational media coverage as well as widely varying estimates of the snake's length and weight. In the interest of scientific accuracy, we sought and received the cooperation of the Commerce City Police Department in acquiring detailed information regarding both the victim and the snake so that correct data could be placed on record.*

*The victim was a 15-year-old male, 152 cm [5'] tall, weighing 43 kg [95lb]. While in bed, naked except for briefs, he was bitten on the right instep, with maxillary and palatine-pterygoid tooth marks clearly visible on the dorsal surface of the foot and dentary tooth marks clearly visible on the plantar surface. Numerous tooth impressions were present on the fingers of both hands, but only on their palmar surfaces, indicating that the hands had tried to pry open the snake's jaws*

*from around the instep. The fingers and the foot bled profusely. Autopsy photographs revealed scleral ecchymotic hemorrhage, and venous congestion in the cerebrum (petechial and ecchymotic hemorrhage both present), all being signs of agonal breathing consistent with a diagnosis of suffocation as a cause of death. No attempt was made during autopsy to distinguish between suffocation and circulatory arrest (Hardy, 1993) as causes of death; however, in subsequent correspondence the pathologist hypothesized that circulatory arrest would more likely be the cause of death of smaller prey, whereas suffocation would be more likely with larger victims. Although blood was present on the victim's face, hands arms and legs, there was no blood present on the neck or on the middle of the torso, suggesting that the snake's coils had been wrapped around this area. Bruising of the victim's skin, consistent with this hypothesis, was visible in the photographs. There was no evidence that the snake had attempted to swallow any part of the victim.*

*The snake was 336 cm [11'2"] total length, and weighed 24 kg [53lb]. Incidentally, almost all estimates of the snake's weight presented by the media were above 27 kg and ranged as high as 54 kg. The only accurate weight had been recorded by Officer Steven Paxton soon after the fatality, but few news writers quoted him, preferring to use the larger, exaggerated numbers. Circumference at the thickest part of the body was 38cm [15"]. The snake had not been fed for 10 days prior to taking the measurements reported here (19 September 1993) and the most recent meal had already been digested and passed. Thus, the digestive system was probably empty. We did not probe the snake's cloaca, but the short tail and diminutive pelvic spurs strongly suggest that it is a female. This animal had been raised since hatching*



*by a close relative of the victim, and at the time of the attack the snake was not confined to a cage, but had freedom to move about the house. The victim was long familiar with the snake'.*

This raises the question of why the snake killed so large a victim. Although any answer that we can put forward would be conjectural, it is known that pythons and certain other constrictors will sometimes attack prey that cannot be ingested (Branch and Hacke, 1980; Fritts et al., 1990), whether through misinterpretation of size or through presence on the victim of chemical or other cues that are associated with normal prey.

Perhaps the most significant point to emerge from this Colorado case is the fact that a 24kg python, modest in size by comparison with full grown specimens of this and several other species, was able to kill a healthy 43kg adolescent human. This will come as no surprise to experienced herpetologists, but it might be startling to people who have grown unjustifiably complacent with their now mature pythons that have been raised since hatching.'

Through years of meeting people - especially teenage boys and young male adults - who want or have just bought Burmese and reticulated pythons, I have found that they really do not understand just how big their snakes will get, and even if they do, being 'cool' tends to override common sense. Many people recommend Burmese as 'good starter snakes' instead of Ball pythons (*Python regius*) because of their docility and hearty appetite (failing to recognize that the initial nervousness and reticence to feed are traits common to wild caught Ball pythons, not to captive bred ones).

I recently met two people who have a deep-seated fear of snakes, both due to encounters with large, loose pythons. The first is a woman whose infant niece

was killed by the parent's python which had been kept in an insecure enclosure. The second is a young man who, while sleeping at a friend's house, was awakened by the friend's Burmese python which was in the process of wrapping itself around the young man. When he had gone to bed, the snake was on top of the refrigerator, its owner not wanting to 'disturb' it by getting it down and putting it safely away.

What must be remembered is that, no matter how tame and friendly the snake, it is and always will be a wild animal, and as such, subject to what appears to the owner to be unpredictable behavior. No matter how many years one has had a snake, no matter how familiar the snake is with its owner-family, hunger, fear, unease and other factors can trigger instinctual behaviors. Good examples of this were published in the February 1994 issue of *Reptiles* (Pssst...wanna see my pet snake?) and in the general press in 1996 (NY Teen Killed by Pet Burmese)

Another misconception about giant pythons (and giant iguanid and varanid lizards) is that when they get 'too' big, they can be given to zoos and wild animal parks. NOT! Zoos and wild animal parks have all the giant reptiles that they can handle. Zoos should not, even if they could afford to spare the resources, become a repository of cast-off pets.

The giant pythons are beautiful, awesome animals. There is something breathtaking about seeing a snake with a girth the size of a telephone pole, coiled up contentedly in its basking area. But there are some animals that are not suitable as common pets for some people due to the amount of space and other resources that must be committed to that animal for its entire life (which may span two or three decades).

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