

AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF ALL ANIMALS


PETA
 FOUNDATION

December 19, 2017

Governing Board
 South Florida Water Management District
 3301 Gun Club Rd.
 West Palm Beach, FL 33406
 Fax: (561) 682-5374

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
 620 S. Meridian St.
 Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600
 Fax: (850) 488-6412

Dear Board and Commission members:

This letter is written on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and its 6.5 million members and supporters in response to an article published online by the *Miami Herald* that includes a video and photographs of Burmese pythons killed as part of the South Florida Water Management District's (District) Python Elimination Program.¹ The video and one of the photographs raise concerns that the animals depicted may not have been killed in the most humane manner possible. PETA requests that you confirm the methods used to kill the snakes, refer any possible violations of the State's cruelty-to-animals statute to the appropriate authorities, and implement measures to ensure that all participants in this and similar hunts are thoroughly instructed in euthanasia methods approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

The *Miami Herald* article includes a video in which a hunter explains that he shot a 17-foot python somewhere in the head and that "she got popped again ... on the neck later." This statement raises two concerns with serious implications for animal welfare. First, if the hunter had correctly positioned the shot to the head, the animal would have died relatively rapidly and there would have been no need for a second shot "on the neck later." Second, as explained below, a python should never be shot in the neck since it's imperative that the animal's brain be destroyed immediately to avoid prolonged suffering. A photograph in the same article depicts a snake with a large, gaping wound in the area of the lungs, heart, stomach, and liver who was apparently killed as part of another eradication

¹Jenny Staletovich, *Hunter shoots and bags a 17-foot Everglades python*, Miami Herald, Dec. 5, 2017 <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/environment/article188140584.html>. See also Lindsey Bever, *Don't read this article if you are afraid of giant snakes three times your size*, The Washington Post, Dec. 6, 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2017/12/06/this-giant-snake-is-three-times-your-size-and-why-you-should-just-avoid-the-everglades/?utm_term=.db1242af850f.

PEOPLE FOR
 THE ETHICAL
 TREATMENT
 OF ANIMALS
 FOUNDATION

Washington, D.C.
 1536 16th St. N.W.
 Washington, DC 20036
 202-483-PETA

Los Angeles
 2154 W. Sunset Blvd.
 Los Angeles, CA 90026
 323-644-PETA

Norfolk
 501 Front St.
 Norfolk, VA 23510
 757-622-PETA

Berkeley
 2855 Telegraph Ave.
 Ste. 301
 Berkeley, CA 94705
 510-763-PETA

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 OPERATING NAME OF FOUNDATION
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AFFILIATES:

- PETA U.S.
- PETA Asia
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- PETA Australia
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- PETA Netherlands
- PETA Foundation (U.K.)

effort. If this wound was inflicted prior to the destruction of the brain, this snake would have suffered immensely.

The use of a penetrating captive-bolt gun or gunshot to the brain is the only non-conditional method of euthanasia approved by the AVMA that applies to large reptiles in circumstances such as are encountered in the various hunts in Florida,² and it's the only method in which laypersons can be adequately trained.³ Proper positioning for the penetration of the captive-bolt or firearm projectile is critical because of the unique physiological characteristics of reptiles, who require immediate destruction of the brain in order to avoid undue pain and suffering. Reptiles are highly tolerant of conditions that result in lowered oxygen and blood pressure levels.⁴ It is undisputed that these animals would continue to sense pain after a nonlethal injury such as a misplaced gunshot and even for up to an hour after decapitation—another practice sanctioned by the State.⁵ In addition, pain perception in reptiles is analogous to that in mammals,⁶ and because it's difficult to confirm death in reptiles,⁷ they have the capacity to suffer for prolonged periods if euthanasia is not performed correctly. Line drawings of the head that demonstrate proper placement are available, including on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's website,⁸ but proper training is imperative.

As sponsors of these hunts, the District and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission ("Commission") have a duty to make sure that hunters are properly instructed in the AVMA-approved methods for killing snakes and that the instructions are enforced in the field. Mere reference to the AVMA *Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals* in the District's rules is insufficient, as "[t]he recommendations in the Guidelines are intended to guide veterinarians, who must then use professional judgment in applying them to the various settings where animals are to be euthanized."⁹ Experts have previously advised the Commission that laypersons can never be adequately trained to properly implement most of the methods set forth in the *Guidelines* that are applicable to large snakes captured in the field.¹⁰ As the Commission is aware, this is not the first time that evidence of inhumane treatment of snakes has made its way into the media, nor the first time that PETA has requested appropriate action to prevent further incidents of cruelty against this population of nonnative animals, who have become established in the State through no fault of their own.

²See American Veterinary Medical Association, *Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals: 2013 Edition*, pp. 77-8.

³E-mail from Dr. Clifford Warwick to Kristen Penney Sommers, Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, dated Dec. 28, 2012. (On file with author.)

⁴See, e.g., Philip E. Bickler and Leslie T. Buck, *Hypoxia Tolerance in Reptiles, Amphibians, and Fishes: Life With Variable Oxygen Availability*, Annual Review of Physiology (2007).

⁵See, e.g., Dr. Clifford Warwick, *Reptiles: Misunderstood, Mistreated and Mass-Marketed* (1990).

⁶See, e.g., R. Avery Bennett, DVM, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Florida, "Pain and Analgesia in Reptiles and Amphibians" (1998)

http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/members.arav.org/resources/resmgr/Files/Proceedings_1998/1998_01.pdf

⁷See, e.g., Warren, K., "Reptile euthanasia: No easy solution?" ANZCCART Conference (2012).

⁸Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, "Python Euthanasia," <http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/python/pickup/euthanasia/>.

⁹American Veterinary Medical Association <https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Euthanasia-Guidelines.aspx>.

¹⁰*Supra*, n. 3.

The conduct described by the hunter and depicted in the video and photograph appears to be evidence of a disregard for the ethical obligation of the State and the hunters to ensure that the pythons do not suffer more than is necessary and of the legal obligation not to run afoul of the State's cruelty-to-animals statute, which provides that "[a] person who intentionally commits an act to any animal which results in the cruel death, or excessive or repeated infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering, or causes the same to be done, is guilty of a felony of the third degree"¹¹

As a final point, PETA continues to have concerns about the use of what is, in effect, a bounty to encourage the killing of pythons. Experts agree that bounties actually thwart eradication efforts. For example, a report prepared by the U.S. Geological Survey, in which possible solutions to the problem of invasive nonnative reptiles were examined, concluded that "[b]ounties have never been used successfully with invasive reptiles."¹² The report explains that bounties have been detrimental because "any feature that adds value to an invasive species ... creates economic pressure to assure the population's continuation, and further spread."¹³ The District's Python Elimination Program pays hunters an hourly rate, an additional payment of \$50 for each python measuring up to 4 feet long, plus an extra \$25 for each additional foot.¹⁴ An additional \$200 is paid to hunters for each python killed who was found guarding a nest with eggs.

For the reasons stated herein, PETA respectfully requests that the District and the Commission investigate the incidents depicted in the *Miami Herald* article, limit approved methods for killing snakes to the use of a captive-bolt gun or gunshot, require training as to the proper placement of such instruments, and carefully reevaluate any future consideration of a bounty on pythons.

Sincerely,



Lori Kettler
Deputy General Counsel

¹¹Fla. Stat. Ann. § 828.12(2). The Florida Supreme Court has held that the cruelty-to-animals statute is a general intent statute and "simply requires that the person 'intentionally commit[] an act to any animal which results in the cruel death, or excessive or repeated infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering, or causes the same to be done.'" *Reynolds v. State*, 842 So. 2d 46, 50 (Fla. 2002).

¹²U.S. Geological Survey, "Giant Constrictors: Biological and Management Profiles and an Establishment Risk Assessment for Nine Large Species of Pythons, Anacondas, and the Boa Constrictor," p. 38 (2009).

¹³*Id.*

¹⁴South Florida Water Management District, "Python Elimination Program," <https://www.sfwmd.gov/our-work/python-program>.