



United States Department of the Interior



IN REPLY REFER TO:
10.D. (SER-RD)

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Southeast Regional Office
Atlanta Federal Center
1924 Building
100 Alabama St., SW.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

SEP 25 2015

Mr. Jeff Ruch, Executive Director
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility
2000 P Street, NW, Suite 240
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Ruch;

Thank you for your letter of August 21, 2015, regarding the management of invasive python snakes in Everglades National Park (Park). In your letter you expressed concern about an article in the Miami Herald on August 18, 2015, regarding the 2016 Python Challenge (Challenge) in southern Florida and the reported potential for hunting in the Park. Unfortunately, the article, as well as several other news reports, may have contributed to a misunderstanding of the Park's planned participation in the Challenge.

First and foremost, hunting is not authorized in the park. As you noted, the public is prohibited from killing animals and removing them from the Park, and no Congressional authorization for hunting has been provided.

National Park Service (NPS) Management Policies address invasive species and their removal. In accordance with Management Policies, the Park conducts python and invasive reptile capture by Park staff, permitted researchers, and authorized agents (Agents). The Agents are trained park volunteers who operate under a special "Python Removal Authorized Agent" program. The primary purpose of the program is to support python research and provide information that contributes to developing effective control methods in the future.

We believe the Park's Authorized Agent program meets the intent of NPS management policies with respect to removing invasive animals. Through this program, any member of the public may become an Agent subject to the following requirements:

- Register as an NPS volunteer
- A criminal background check must be completed, and the applicant must be approved by the Chief Ranger or his/her designee.
- Demonstrate experience in safely capturing and handling large constrictor snakes. This can be documented through reference checks, documented apprenticeship with other agents or staff, or completion of the "Python Patrol" training, including capture of a snake during training.

- Must provide certificate of completion of the online “REDDy training” on identification of native and exotic reptiles.
- Must read and sign Authorized Agent Job Hazard Analysis.
- Must complete a South Florida NPS orientation.
- Must adhere to conditions of the authorization, including reporting requirements, dispatch notification (when appropriate), and media/social media guidelines.
- Must meet participation requirements as stated in the Letter of Authorization.


The Park does not allow Agents to kill invasive animals. All pythons and other animals are humanely captured alive and turned over to NPS staff. Contrary to the assertions in your letter, the Park is not establishing “hunting zones,” and has no intention of allowing “members of the public with Florida licenses to pursue, capture and/or kill pythons.”

The Park’s August 18, 2015, joint press release with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), states its intent to allow the Park’s Agents to participate in the 2016 Python Challenge. Your letter, as well as statements in the media, clearly suggests the Park’s intent was not well understood.

To be clear, the Park allowed already-enrolled Agents to participate in the 2013 Python Challenge to the extent that the Agent program was compatible with the Python Challenge rules. Because the 2013 Python Challenge required all pythons to be turned in dead, Park Agents were not technically eligible to compete in the competition. However, they were allowed to participate for recognition. In the 2016 Challenge, FWC is allowing pythons to be turned in alive and will accept certified records of pythons turned in to other agencies. This will allow pythons captured by Park Agents to be eligible in the Challenge. As of 2014, Everglades National Park had 36 authorized agents that will be offered the opportunity to participate.

Superintendent Ramos places great emphasis on thoughtful planning and is committed to the stewardship principles of the National Park Service. If you have future questions about Everglades National Park please contact Superintendent Ramos at 305-242-7712.

Sincerely,



Stan Austin
Regional Director