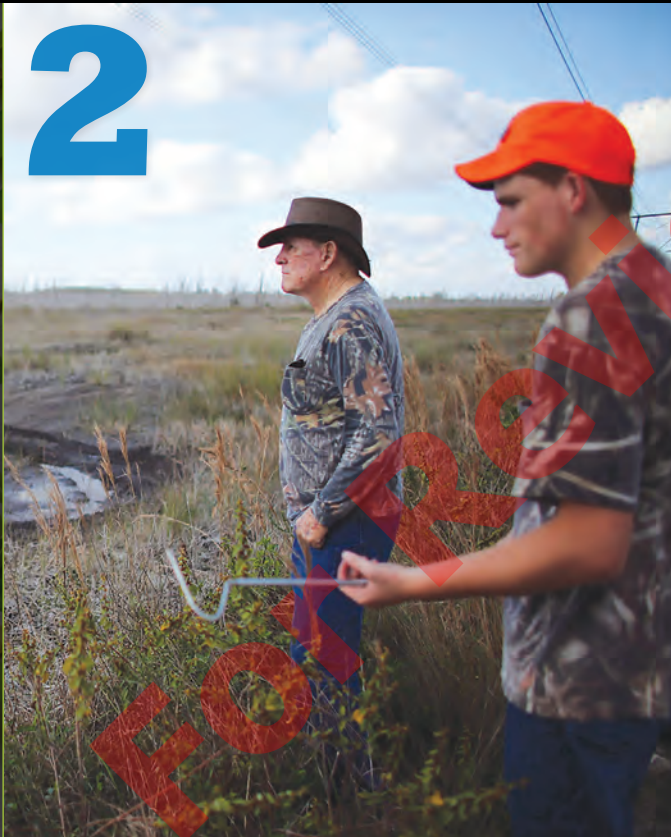


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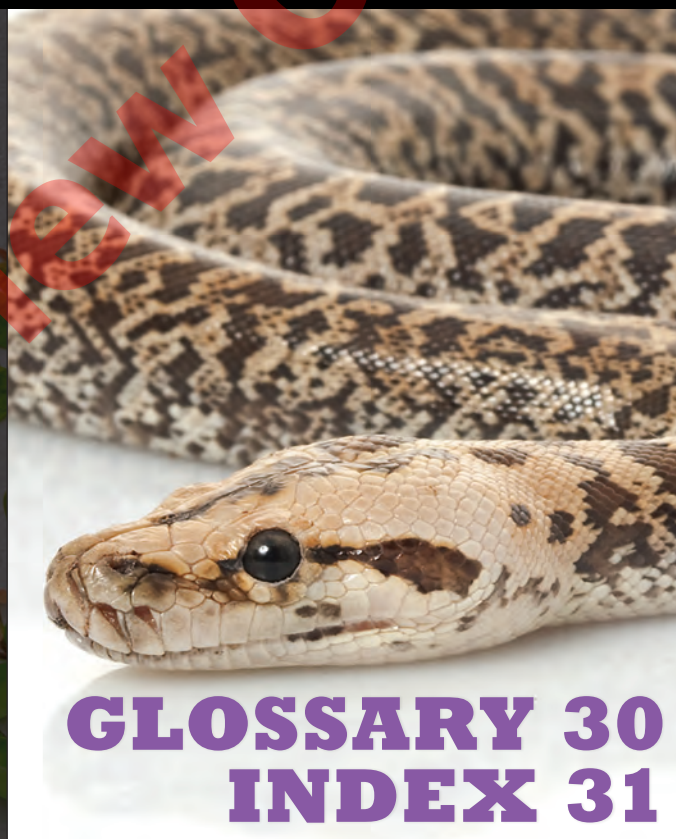
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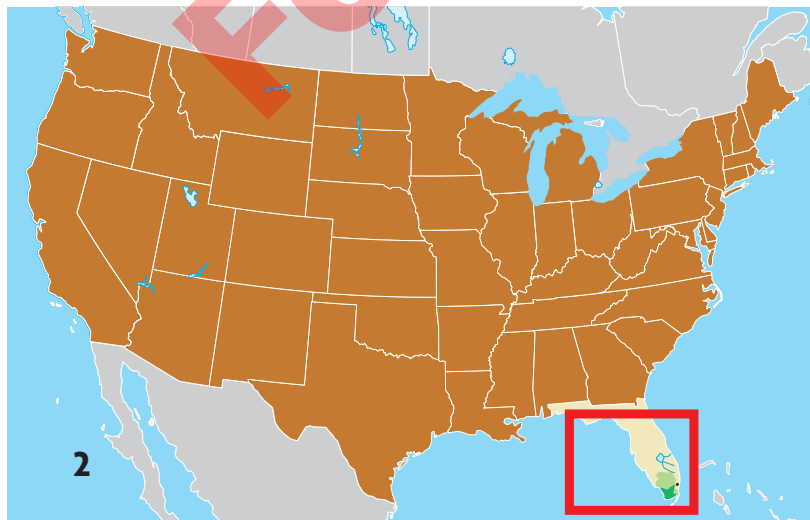


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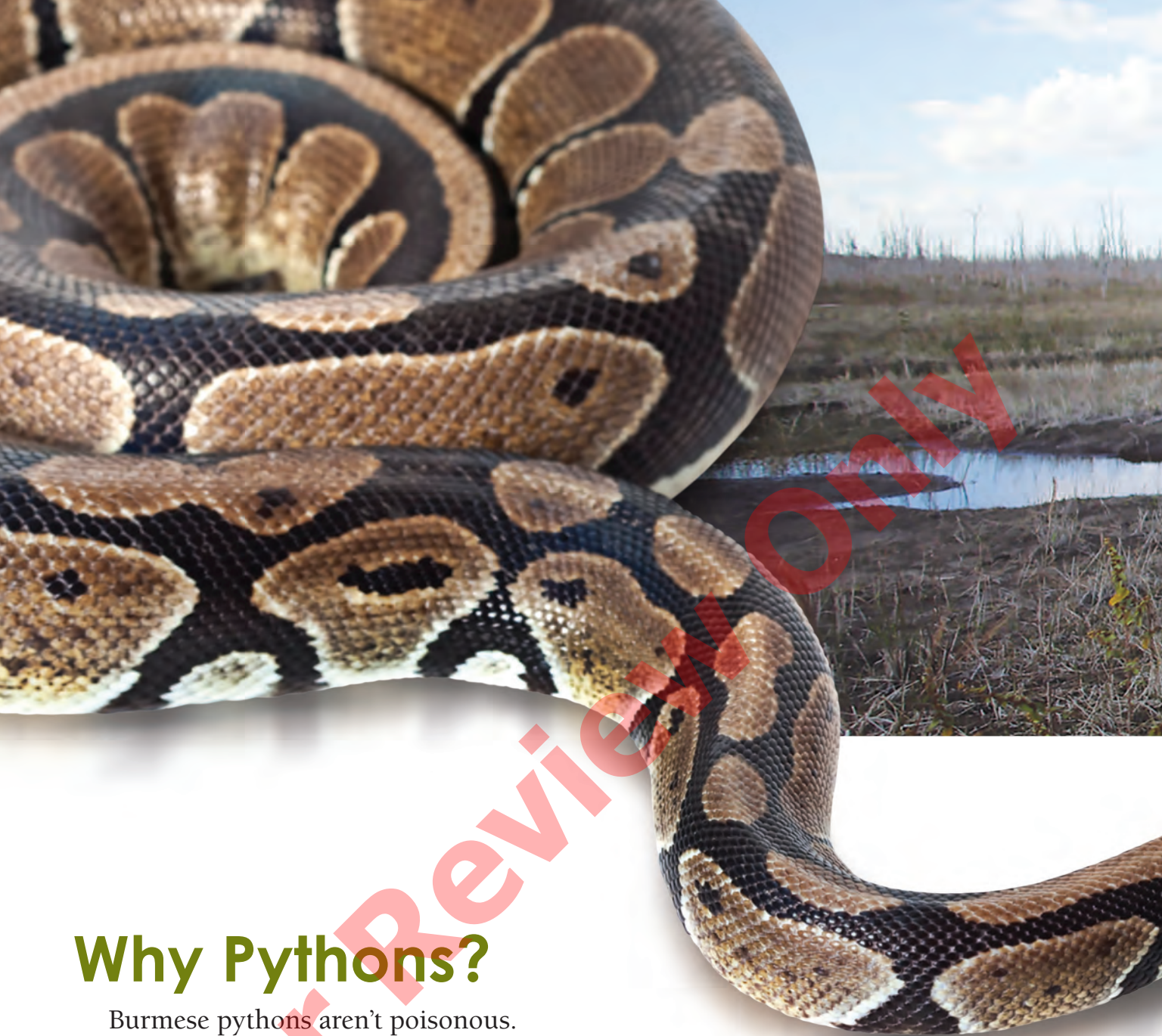


Burmese pythons thrive in the Everglades.

EVERGLADES

It was January of 2013, and hopeful hunters had come to Florida's Everglades region from around the country—38 different states to be exact. Most of them were inexperienced, but they had been drawn by a compelling challenge. The state's Fish and Wildlife Commission was sponsoring a

snake hunt. These hopefuls would be hunting a huge, hard-to-find beast that the state considered unwelcome: the Burmese python. Since they first slithered their way into the Everglades, these giant snakes had become true swamp monsters, threatening the unique Everglades ecosystem.



Why Pythons?

Burmese pythons aren't poisonous. Plus, they pose almost no threat to humans. So why did authorities want hunters to catch as many as they could? The reason is simple. Burmese pythons are an invasive species.

An invasive species is an animal or plant that is not native, or original, to an ecosystem and has a negative effect on it. These species often enter a new ecosystem accidentally.

Sometimes, though, they are purposely introduced. An invasive species can threaten a region's biodiversity, wreaking havoc on an area's ecosystem, particularly its food web. The term *food web* refers to an ecosystem's complex relationships between living things. It's like a



▲ These hunters were part of an effort to control the number of Burmese python in the Everglades.

diagram of who eats what, or whom, within a given habitat.

Most food webs contain a delicate balance of predators, prey, and plants. Invasive species can throw off this balance. The Burmese python is a perfect example. It is native to southeast Asia, where it lives mainly

in tropical rain forests and is a part of that region's balanced ecosystem. But in southern Florida, the python doesn't have as much competition for food. As a result, these colossal snakes have literally eaten their way through the Everglades, disrupting the area's food web.

Big Eaters

Burmese pythons disrupt the food web in two main ways. According to the National Park Service, “By preying on native wildlife and competing with other native predators, pythons are seriously impacting the natural order of south Florida’s ecological communities.”

What does the National Park Service mean? First, the pythons in the Everglades are known to prey on a wide variety of native wildlife, including rodents, raccoons, rabbits, bobcats, and deer. And they’re super

successful hunters. A 2012 study done by biologists and presented to the National Academy of Sciences found that these animals have severely declined in number since the python arrived. Foxes and rabbits have almost completely disappeared from the area. Deer, opossums, and bobcats are scarce. And raccoon sightings are down over 99 percent. Raccoons used to be the animals that campers and visitors to Everglades National Park complained about the most. But raccoon encounters have become scarce. No visitor has complained about one since 2005.

River of Grass

The term “Everglades” refers to a region of south Florida that contains both freshwater and saltwater areas. In the Everglades are marshes, swamps, prairies, pinelands, hardwood forests, and mangrove forests. The region is home to a large variety of wildlife. The Everglades region is sometimes referred to as a “river of grass” because large parts of it are sawgrass plains with shallow water flowing slowly over. Everglades National Park, formed in 1947, makes up the southern part of the Everglades region.

The second main reason the pythons are such a problem is that they compete with other predators. By being very successful hunters, they reduce the prey available for other large predators. This means animals like the bobcat or the Florida panther—an endangered species—might have trouble getting a meal. And when an animal species can't get enough to eat, its numbers dwindle.

