

Urgent Letter to Snake Enthusiasts from Vincent Russo on S 373

Like most reptile enthusiasts my herpetological interests started at a young age. As a boy I explored the woods, lakes, and streams of my native state of New York, finding painted turtles, bullfrogs and eastern milk snakes. My first pet snake was a Colombian boa I got from a friend (I traded him a horned frog for it). This is where it all started for me and I'm sure most of you have a similar story.

I, however, decided to take my passion one step further - I made *Boa* breeding my full time job. Only in America can such an entrepreneurial thing like "Snake Breeding" be a career opportunity.

But now I find it hard to believe that this career may come to an end because of Senate bill 373 (S373). This bill worries me for many reasons. Not only will I be out of a job, but a lot of young people in America will no longer be able to trade, breed, and sell their works of art (*Boa constrictors*). A few years ago, I was paid a very high compliment by my mentor Eugene Bessette. I heard him say to another snake enthusiast that he "still has not yet met the next Vin Russo"...meaning the next young up-and-coming *Boa* breeder does not (and may never) exist. I was grateful for such a compliment, but also saddened by his prophetic words.

If S373 is passed, we may never see the next Vin Russo or Pete Kahl or even great herpetologists like Dr. Brady Barr. I say this because the young people of today do not have the opportunities I had. Our government (with this bill and similar bills) encourages young people to stay locked in their homes, ignorant of the environment around them. The appreciation for wild and domestic animals starts with simple curiosity which in turn becomes learning and knowledge. I don't know a single herpetologists or other biologist who did not explore nature as a child and did not own some kind of reptile or other "exotic" pet. Do we really want our country to go down this road?

Ironically these bills were fashioned to help protect us as humans and safeguard our environment. Yet young people with little to no knowledge of the natural environment will not be able to help themselves in the future. How will our planet look 40 – 50 years from now with most adults having no knowledge about preserving wildlife and ecosystems simply because they were repressed as boys and girls from being allowed to explore their interests in reptiles and nature more generally? Unfortunately, I believe this will be the case because of this S373 and other bills like it.

In 2006 I wrote my book "The Complete Boa Constrictor." This book took many years to write, and at the time I never thought that I would be writing this letter. My book was written for many reasons, most importantly to educate the public and snake enthusiasts on these beautiful serpentine creatures.

It's now time that we the constrictor enthusiasts educate the masses about our passion and how our passion contributes to environmental protection. We all need to speak publicly

about this. We all need to visit our state Senators and local Congressmen and women and tell them that *Boa constrictors* are not “injurious wildlife.”

To date (and *Boas* have been kept as pets for 50 years), not a single person has been killed or seriously injured by a *Boa constrictor*. But yet hundreds of people are killed each year by dogs. Secondly, only a small number of *Boa constrictors* have survived outside their native range of Central and South America and that is at one unique location in the warm southern tip of Florida. Consider, however, that over 60 million feral cats roam urban, suburban, and rural landscapes devastating indigenous wildlife and no one has proposed that they be considered “injurious.” *Boas* are tropical snakes and long periods of cold weather will kill them. It is my opinion, therefore, that this is Florida or more generally a state issue and not a Federal issue. So please, get out there and fight for your herpetological rights and fight for the future of our planet’s ecosystems.

And, if you are not yet a member of the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), please join as an individual and/or a business. Visit www.pijac.org and www.dontmesswithmypet.org. PIJAC protects responsible pet owners from misguided legislation, including S 373 and similar bills.

Sincerely,

Vincent Russo
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