

Published Mar 7, 2011

Published Monday March 7, 2011

## Bill constricts snake sellers

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KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

An albino tiger reticulated python in Travis Kubes' breeding facility in Norfolk. A bill introduced in the Nebraska Legislature would place restrictions on the kinds and lengths of snakes permitted in the state.

About 100 cages of reticulated pythons line the walls of a Norfolk reptile breeding facility.

Reticulated pythons are one of the world's largest snakes — many of the constrictors reach up to 15 feet long. Some lie in their warm cages protecting a dozen eggs. The hatchlings, when grown, will be shipped as pets to people across the United States.

But breeder Travis Kubes' 10-year hobby could be in trouble if Nebraska adopts statewide restrictions on exotic animals.

Nebraska is one of the few states that do not regulate reptile pet ownership. In much of the state people can, for example, own a 15-foot venomous snake. But if Legislative Bill 64 passes, Kubes' snakes could no longer be bred or sold in Nebraska.

State Sen. Abbie Cornett of Bellevue introduced LB 64 after a Papillion man was strangled last summer by his pet 9-foot red-tailed boa constrictor.

Omaha already has a city ordinance prohibiting ownership of snakes longer than 8 feet, and venomous snakes aren't allowed either. Council Bluffs restricts venomous snakes as well as constrictors.

In Papillion — where Cory Byrne died in 2010 — no ordinance regulates the length of snakes kept as pets.

Cornett's proposal would restrict pet snake length statewide to 8 feet and prohibit owning venomous snakes. The bill would require that any Nebraskan seeking to own a wild animal first must obtain a permit and \$250,000 in exotic animal liability insurance, which may have to be obtained from an insurer other than the person's homeowner's insurance provider. (Not all providers will write policies covering dangerous animals.)

The owner of a wild pet also would be required to publicly display a sign stating that possibly dangerous wildlife was on the premises. Someone who already owns a wild pet would be exempted until he or she buys a new wild pet. Iowa already enforces registration and requires the public signs and insurance.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission officials said they plan to meet with Cornett this month to improve the legislation. Cornett said the bill could be delayed until next year's legislative session, giving her time to find ways to lower the bill's enforcement costs, estimated at more than \$300,000 per year.

Under the bill's current language, Game and Parks would be responsible for issuing permits that cost no more than \$65 a year, regardless of enforcement costs.

The agency opposed the bill at a hearing last month.

“What it attempted to accomplish wasn't necessarily accomplished within the bill,” said Jim Douglas, deputy director of Game and Parks.

The Nebraska Humane Society asked Cornett to propose LB 64.

Over the past six years the Humane Society has captured, among others, a few loose alligators and two 10-foot pythons. Kristie Biodrowski, the society's field director, said the bill would require wild reptile owners to be responsible for the costs of capturing animals that escape.

It is unfair for the Humane Society to shoulder the costs, she said, and “it is an important bill to protect the safety of citizens.”

“People may not understand the special needs a large animal might have,” she said. “And large snakes and alligators can pose a danger to the public.”

Iowa and 19 other states ban the private ownership of animals considered dangerous, including nondomesticated felines, wolves, bears, reptiles and nonhuman primates.

But Glenn Eisel, vice president of the Nebraska Herpetological Society, said that even the Nebraska approach — particularly the required permit and insurance — could dramatically hurt his sales of boa constrictor imperator, or the nonvenomous common northern boa.

“No one is going to buy a boa constrictor if they have to pay possibly \$500 or more in (insurance) fees per year,” Eisel said. “And the signage out front of all entrances is going to increase the nosiness of the neighbors.”

Kubes and Eisel both said proper handling and care of snakes is important. Both have studied snakes for years and teach people how to safely handle them at reptile shows.

Eisel stressed that Byrne's death last year was a result of improper handling, pointing out that Byrne had the snake around his neck while showing it to a friend.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln herpetologist Dennis Ferraro said Byrne's death was a rare occurrence but said snakes are not meant to be pets.

Ferraro has seven of Nebraska's native venomous snakes, mostly rattlesnakes, in captivity at a UNL lab for research purposes. The cages have combination locks.

“The bill doesn't stop people from having snakes in their home, and that's where there have been problems,” Ferraro said. “They are not a companion pet, but if the person learns about the animal, they could contribute to conservation.”

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