

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



Thirty-three meeting of the Animals Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 12 - 19 July 2024

PYTHON REGIUS AND THE REVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT TRADE

This document has been submitted by the United States of America on behalf of Dr. Neil D’Cruze, Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, University of Oxford, in relation to agenda item 14.3.* The document does not reflect the official position of the United States of America.

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27.06.23

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RE: *Python regius* & Review of Significant Trade (AC 33 Doc.14.3)

Background:

My name is Dr Neil D’Cruze, and I am an Academic Visitor at the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, University of Oxford. Pertaining to the formulation of recommendations for *Python regius* from Benin, Ghana and Togo through the Review of Significant Trade at the 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee, and based on multiple years of research on the trade and management of this species, a series of recommendations are provided for consideration (a full list of key relevant publications is provided at the end of this letter):

Python regius has been listed in CITES Appendix II since 1977, it is one of the most traded reptiles in the international pet trade, and the most traded CITES-listed live animal species exported from Africa. A recent assessment (2021) reclassified *Python regius* from “Least Concern” to “Near Threatened” in the IUCN Red List. Live exports of this species through all three major source countries in West Africa (Benin, Ghana, and Togo) have experienced a sharp increase in recent years. The majority of individuals exported are reported as “ranching” (CITES source code R) although gravid females are being collected from the wild for export, thus the definition of “ranching” is not met. In 2024, export quotas were set at 62,500 (Togo), 60,000 (Ghana), and 32,000 (Benin) ranching individuals.

Drawing attention to AC33 Doc. 14.3 Annex 2 and following a review of current evidence in consultation with range states and scientific experts, UNEP-WCMC has concluded that “Action is Required” for *Python regius* from Benin, Ghana, and Togo based on the country’s poor conservation status of the species and outstanding recommendations relating to the development of management practices to ensure sustainable harvest of the species.

Recommendations:

Short term: A review of current evidence suggests significant population declines, local extirpations and that export levels of *Python regius* from Benin, Ghana, and Togo are unsustainable. Consequently, immediate action is necessary to mitigate any adverse consequences for wild populations across the three exporting states in West Africa before implementing longer-term measures. To address long-standing concerns, it is recommended

that a zero export quota is established for ranched specimens of *Python regius* from Benin, Ghana and Togo until evidence of sustainable management practices is made fully available.

This approach would align with the precedent set by the European Union's Scientific Review Group, which issued a negative opinion, suspending imports of ranched *Python regius* specimens from Benin and Togo on 19th September 2023 and for Ghana already on 31st January 2014. Imports of wild specimens from Benin and Ghana into the EU have also been suspended.

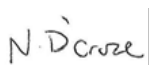
Long term: Current evidence also suggests that while annual quota systems are in place, these appear to have no scientific basis, and no formal management or monitoring plans for *Python regius* currently exist for Benin, Ghana, or Togo. Therefore, longer term action is also necessary to safeguard the survival of wild populations in these three range states. It is recommended that these longer-term goals should be focused on improving species knowledge available for making an NDF and implementing harvest management measures to mitigate any negative impacts of export on the species.

Specifically, it is recommended that science-based studies focused on the population status, trends, and genetics of *Python regius* in Benin, Ghana, and Togo should be carried out to make the required species knowledge available for making an informative NDF. In addition, management and monitoring plans should focus on ensuring that source codes are accurately applied, that the release of any specimens does not negatively impact on the conservation status of wild populations (via genetic pollution and or introduction of zoonotic disease), that illegal cross border trade does not occur, and that any wild sourcing to support the export of *Python regius* is in full compliance with each of the three country's national legislation and relevant CITES requirements. Moreover, a tripartite initiative between these three range states should be adopted given the large extent of (unregulated) cross border trade.

Conclusion:

While no formal response has been provided by Benin, it is commendable to see that Ghana and Togo have responded to the Secretariat request (made on 5 July 2023) for comments regarding possible problems with the implementation of Article IV of the Convention for trade in these species. Togo, in particular has stated that it plans to conduct a study to gather detailed information on the status of *Python regius*, with the aim to develop an NDF, and indicated this information could be provided in early 2024. However, it should be recognized that the information provided is currently insufficient to assure sustainability. It is therefore recommended to establish a zero export quota as a short-term measure and as long term-measures science based population studies, development of management and monitoring plans and capacity building to ensure appropriate use of source codes.

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Relevant Published Research

Auliya, M., Hofmann, S., Segniagbeto, G.H., Assou, D., Ronfot, D., Astrin, J.J., ... D’Cruze, N. (2020) **The first genetic assessment of wild and farmed ball pythons (Reptilia, Serpentes, Pythonidae) in southern Togo.** *Nature Conservation*, **38**, 37–59. [Available here.](#)

D’Cruze, N., Harrington, L. A., Assou, D., Ronfot, D., Macdonald, D. W., Segniagbeto, G. H., & Auliya, M. (2020a). **Searching for snakes: Ball python hunting in southern Togo, West Africa.** *Nature Conservation*, **38**, 13–36. [Available here.](#)

D’Cruze, N., Harrington, L. A., Assou, D., Green, J., Macdonald, D. W., Ronfot, D., ... Auliya, M. (2020b). **Betting the farm: A review of ball python and other reptile trade from Togo, West Africa.** *Nature Conservation*, **40**, 65–91. [Available here.](#)

D’Cruze, N., Assou, D., Coulthard, E., Norrey, J., Megson, D., Macdonald, D.W., ... Auliya, M. (2020c) **Insights into wild animal use at “Marché des Fétiches” traditional medicine market, Togo.** *Nature Conservation*, **39**, 45–71. [Available here.](#)

D’Cruze, N., Bates, J., Assou, D., Ronfot, D., Coulthard, E., Segniagbeto, G. H., ... Rowntree, J. (2020d). **A preliminary assessment of bacteria in “ranching” ball pythons (*Python regius*), Togo, West Africa.** *Nature Conservation*, **39**, 73–86. [Available here.](#)

Harrington, L.A., Green, J., Muinde, P., Macdonald, D.W., Auliya, M., D’Cruze, N. (2020) **Snakes and ladders: A review of ball python production in West Africa for the global pet market.** *Nature Conservation*, **41**, 1–24. [Available here.](#)

Harrington, L.A., Auliya, M., Eckman, H., Harrington, A.P., Macdonald, D.W. and D’Cruze, N. (2021) **Live wild animal exports to supply the exotic pet trade: A case study from Togo using publicly available social media data.** *Conservation Science and Practice*, **3**, e430. [Available here.](#)

D’Cruze, N., Wilms, T., Penner, J., Luiselli, L., Jallow, M., Segniagbeto, G., ... Schmitz, A. (2021) ***Python regius***. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2021: e.T177562A15340592. [Available here.](#)

Toudonou, C., Elwin, A., Penner J., Coulthard, E., Norrey J., Megson, D., ... D’Cruze, N. (2022) **Seeking serpents: Ball python trade in Benin, West Africa.** *Nature Conservation* **50**, 85-114. [Available here.](#)