

On the presence of *Python sebae* Gmelin, 1788 (Ophidia: Pythonidae) in Mauritania

JOSÉ M. PADIAL

Museo de Historia Natural Noel Kempff Mercado. Área de Zoología, Sección Herpetología,
P.O. Box 2489, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. E-mail: jmpadial@yahoo.com

THE African Python (*Python sebae*) occurs in several countries of West Africa (Villiers, 1975; Chippaux, 2001). It was not listed by Welch (1982) and Chippaux (2001) for Mauritania, but had previously been suspected to occur in this country (Villiers, 1975; Ineich, 1997). Villiers (1975) cited a number of localities where local people had spoken about snakes and whose descriptions agreed with *P. sebae*. The localities cited by this author were Boudami in the Wilaya

Gorgol and M'Bout and Meyane in the Wilaya Guidimaka (Figure 1), all within the Sahel savanna of Mauritania. Ineich (1997) also described having heard local people speak about pythons, and noted that the presence of this species would be plausible in Lake R'Kiz and in the wetlands of Diawling National Park, both in the Wilaya Trarza (Fig. 1). It was occasionally mentioned for the country by Shine et al. (2001) without any additional information. The aim of this paper is to report the

first confirmed records of *P. sebae* for Mauritania, and to present all available information about the distribution of this species in the country.

During fieldwork in Mauritania between April and August 2002 we found pythons in two wetlands: Mahmûdé



Figure 1. Distribution of *Python sebae* in Mauritania. Numbers indicate the localities where pythons were actually found; letters indicate the uncertain records. 1: Mahmûdé Lake (16°29'58"N, 7°42'55"W); 2: 30 km N of N'Diogo, Diawling National Park (16°26'16"N, 16°28'00"W); a: Boudami (coordinates not found); b: M'Bout (16°01'42"N, 12°34'38"W); c: Meyane (coordinates not found); d: R'Kiz Lake (16°55'7"N, 15°14'26"W); e: Tamourt Bougari (16°32'2"N, 10°47'54"W); f: Tamourt en Naaj (17°53'N, 12°07'W).

Lake (Wilaya Hodh Ech Chargui) and Diawling National Park (Fig. 1). Mahmûdé is a 16,000 ha seasonal wetland (locally named Tamourt). During our visit the lake was dry and only some patches of riparian vegetation were available as refuges for the pythons. We observed six specimens; five were dead, killed by local people near vegetation (one skull is deposited in Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, MNCN-41781). One of them was a gravid female. Only one specimen was found alive, among riparian vegetation (Figure 2). It was an adult male (total length: 300 cm; snout-vent length: 273 cm). The skin of another specimen was found 30 km N of N'Diogo, in the Diawling National Park, near the Senegal border, confirming its occurrence in this area as previously suspected by Ineich (1997). Local people informed us about the presence of pythons at two other localities, the Tamourt Bou Gari (Wilaya Assaba) and the Tamourt en Naaj (Wilaya Tagant) (Figure 1). This latter site may represent the northernmost record for the species.

Python sebae seems to be restricted in Mauritania to the isolated wetlands of the sahel savanna. This is a xeric area with seasonal rainfall and strongly influenced by the extreme dry conditions of the Sahara. These factors are almost certainly responsible for its relictual distribution in the area. The same pattern is seen in other water-dependent vertebrates such as crocodiles, amphibians and fishes (pers. obs.), which have survived in the area probably since the last major wet period during the late pleistocene (Böhme 2000). Some of the wetlands suffer from a high level of human pressure through cattle raising, water exploitation and agriculture. In view of this, and the apparent relictual, isolated distribution of *P. sebae* in Mauritania, I consider this species as vulnerable and in urgent need of protection.

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Figure 2. *Python sebae* in the Mahmûdé Lake (Wilaya Hodh Ech Chargui) of Mauritania. Photograph by author.

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