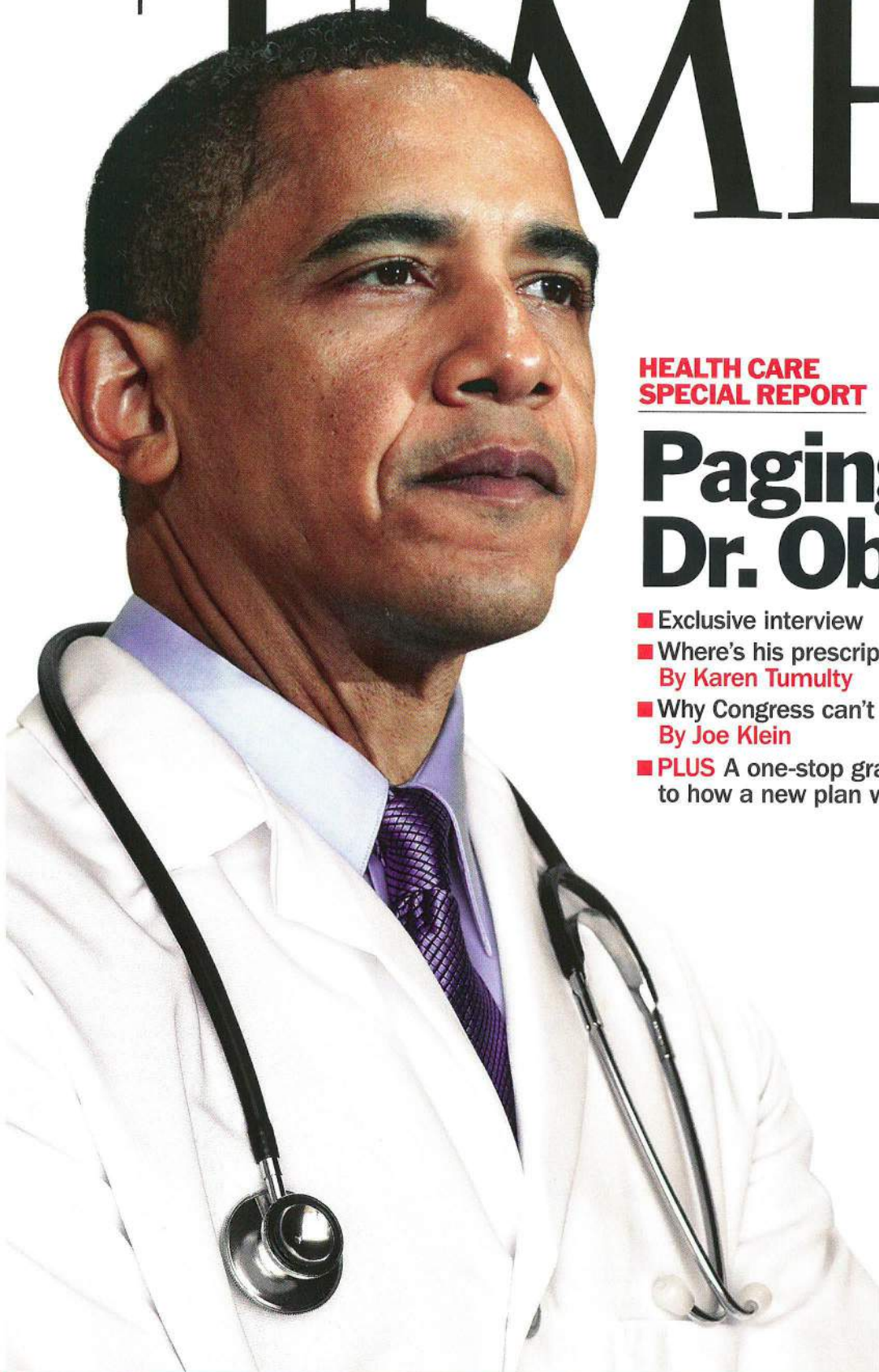


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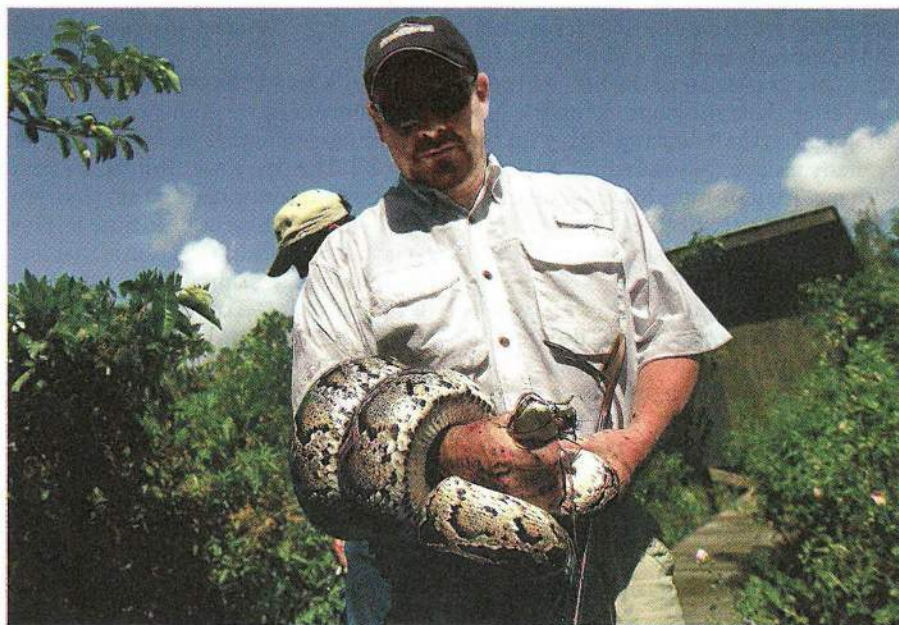
Postcard: The Everglades. An exploding population of voracious Southeast Asian snakes is threatening the endangered fauna of the River of Grass. Florida goes to war against the python

BY TIM PADGETT

THIS IS THE EVERGLADES THAT THEY put in brochures. Summer rains have raised the waters, and lily pads blooming in the searing sun give the sprawling wetlands a Monet mood. But as his airboat glides through the saw grass 30 miles west of Fort Lauderdale, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FWC) commissioner Ron Bergeron is looking for the worst invasive menace to threaten the River of Grass since sugarcane and the Army Corps of Engineers. “They like to sneak onto islands like this one,” says Bergeron, 65, a self-described “glades cracker” who has spent almost as much of his life out here as most alligators have. “They know birds and animals take refuge on them.”

Bergeron is a smart gladesman. He pulls up to the tree-covered hummock, and almost as soon as herpetologists Shawn Heflick and Greg Graziani hop off the airboat armed with snake hooks, they find a 10-foot Burmese python slithering through the mud. Graziani swoops down and grabs the angry serpent’s tail while Heflick goes for the other end. After a brief struggle, during which Heflick gets his hand bloodied by a sharp snake tooth, they pull the python’s head, with its camouflage-like design, into their clutches. “It was trying to cool off deep down there in the slime in this heat,” says Heflick, lifting the python like a trophy as it coils around his forearm and flashes its forked tongue. “Makes it harder to find them this time of year.” When they get back to dry land, the men will kill it.

So begins Day One for Florida’s first officially designated python posse. The population of the voracious nonnative snakes has exploded so frighteningly in the past decade—as many as 150,000 are estimated to be crawling through the Everglades—that the state has launched a hunting offensive to eradicate them before they wipe out the endangered species na-



Snake charmer A captured python wraps itself around the forearm of herpetologist Shawn Heflick

tive to the region, like wood storks and white-tailed deer. Or before they become a human threat: in early July, a 2-year-old girl was strangled to death in her crib by a nearly 9-foot python illegally kept as a pet in her house outside Orlando.

Since then, Florida officials like Bergeron and Senator Bill Nelson have ramped up the python-purge campaign. On July 17, FWC chairman Rodney Barreto issued the first snake-hunting permits for state lands, and U.S. Interior

Secretary Ken Salazar did likewise for Big Cypress National Preserve. (Hunting is banned in Everglades National Park, but Salazar is considering allowing it in this case.) Researchers are even developing a python drone, a small remote-controlled airplane that can detect the constrictors. For now,

only reptile experts like Graziani and Heflick have permission to hunt the serpents. (Using firearms against the reptiles is still prohibited.) But given how prolifically the pythons breed and how big they get—a 13-footer ate a 6-foot alligator a few years ago—Bergeron expects skilled gladesmen armed with

traps, bows and guns to be recruited for bounty-hunting soon. “These monsters are challenging the top of the food chain out here,” he says, “and it’s not natural.”

In large part, Floridians have created their own mess. The Sunshine State loves exotic pets, and sales of pythons, most imported from Southeast Asia, reached \$10 million in the state last year. But too many buyers, after discovering what a large and expensive chore caring for these snakes can be, simply get rid of them. And because there aren’t a lot of adopt-a-python agencies, the reptiles are often dumped in the wild. As a result, Florida in 2008 instituted new ownership requirements, such as \$100 annual permits, proof of snake-handling skills and implantation of microchips in pythons’ hides to keep tabs on the snakes.

After the posse euthanizes the morning’s catch by swiftly severing its brain stem, the men examine its entrails. “She was eating well out there,” says Graziani, noting the large fatty deposits and the animal fur in its stool. But with everyone from politicians to glades crackers pledging to stop the python invasion, the snakes are now the prey.

