

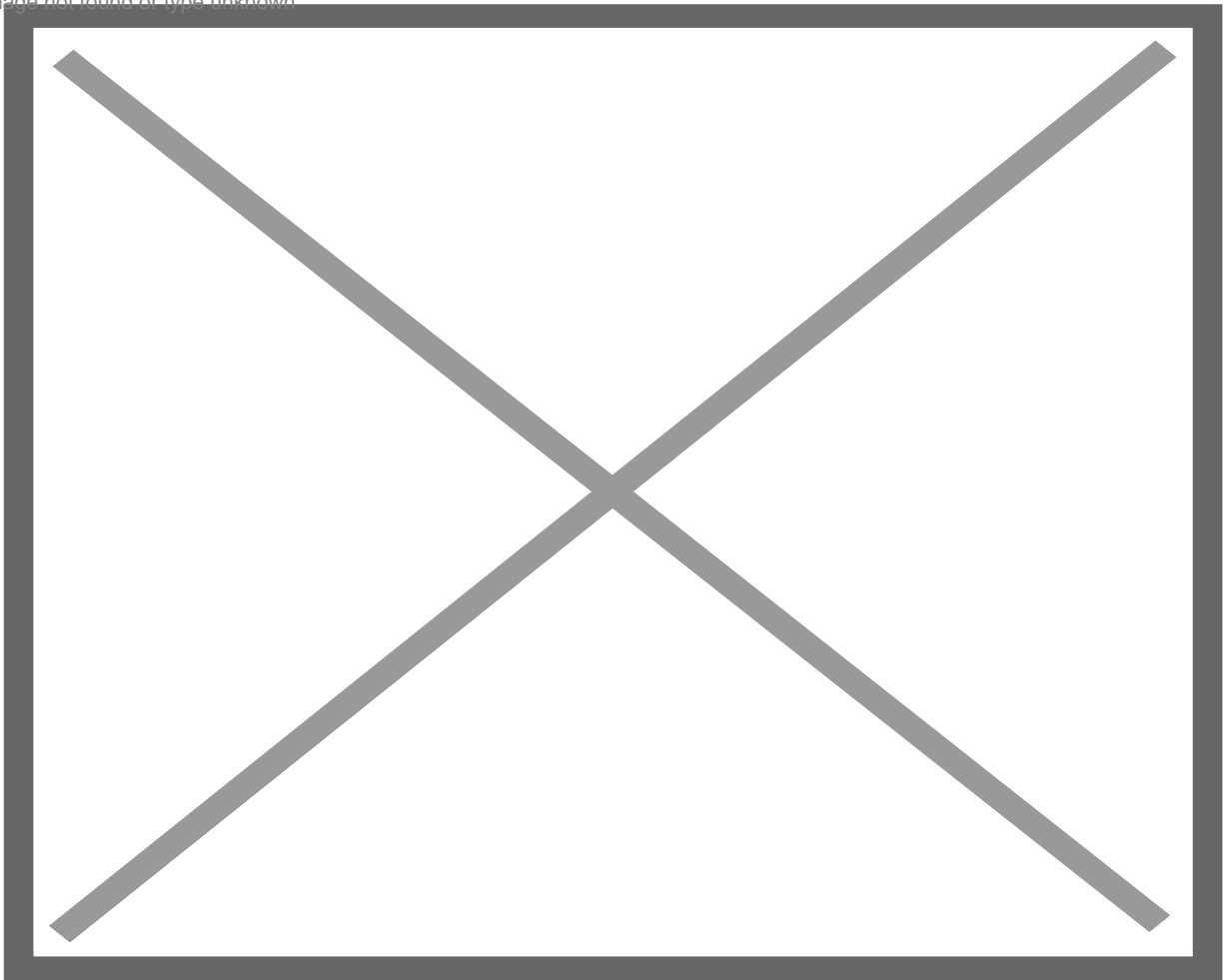
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Bill Looking to Levy Penalty of \$10,000 and 2 Years Imprisonment on Persons Bringing Snakes and Other Species to USVI Illegally to Be Heard Early March

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Dr. Williams Cole holds an Invasive Boa Constrictor snake during the Agriculture and Food Fair on St. Croix last week. By. EVERETTE A. RYAN FOR DEAR PRODUCTIONS

Senator [Athneil Thomas](#) is proposing legislation that would increase the penalty for the illegal importation of snakes into the U.S. Virgin Islands, while imposing new penalties for "the importation of animals or species not indigenous to the Virgin Islands which may pose a threat to the ecosystem of the Virgin Islands and the people of the Virgin Islands."

According to the bill, the penalty for the importation of snakes would go from \$500 to \$5,000. But the bill seems redundant, because it adds language that would levy \$10,000 for the

illegal importation of any animal that may cause harm to the territory or its residents — a category, it appears, the invasive snakes would fall in.

"Whoever imports into the Virgin Islands any animal or species not indigenous to the Virgin Islands, and which may pose a threat to the ecosystem of the Virgin Islands or the residents of the Virgin Islands shall be subject to a fine of not less than \$10,000 and imprisonment of to two (2) years, or both," reads a portion of the measure, seen [here](#).

The draconian law would likely not withstand legal challenges. Indeed, even a draft note at the bottom of the bill written by the Senate's legal counsel warns that the measure goes too far.

"Criminal laws must be narrowly tailored in order to withstand constitutional scrutiny. As proposed, this draft is overbroad and may not withstand legal challenges," reads the draft note. "The identification of specific animals and species, and the establishment of distinct penalties for the importation of each of those specific animals, is highly recommended."

In 2012, the federal government banned the movement of big snakes between states. Following the ban, Virgin Islanders, many of them U.S. mainland expats, released their pet snakes into the wild when they left the territory following the closure of the HOVENSA Refinery in 2012. Many of those snakes were Invasive Boa Constrictors, and that's one of the main reasons why there are so many wild snakes now in the territory, according to Dr. Williams Cole, who spoke about the invasive snake during last week's Agriculture and Food Fair. See video of the talk from DEAR Productions [here](#).