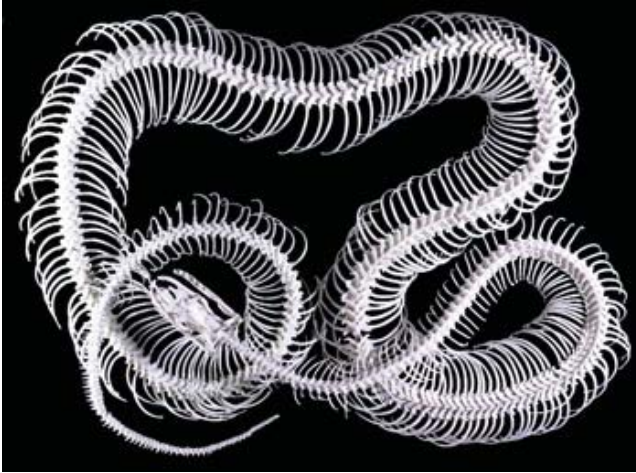


YZC Animal of the Month, February 2010

Python (*Python molurus*)



In the snake display at the back of the upper gallery of the museum is the spectacular mounted skeleton of a python. Pythons are large snakes that kill their prey by constriction. That means that instead of biting their prey with poisonous fangs, pythons suffocate them by wrapping their long, flexible body around the prey animal and squeezing so they can no longer breathe. Ouch!

Pythons are able to swallow their prey whole, and usually head first. Watching their small head encircle an animal as large as a goat or deer is an incredible sight. They are able to swallow food so large

because their skulls are extremely flexible. Soft tissues join the two sides of the lower jaw together so it can spread apart. The jaw joint is very freely moving, allowing an even larger gape, and

the bones on the left and right sides of the skull can move independently. The snake swallows its prey by moving one side its jaws over it and then the other side, like walking over the prey to pull it inside its mouth.

Another feature of snakes is that they have no limbs. Limblessness (try saying that too quickly!) has evolved many times in vertebrates (animals with backbones). Next time you're in the museum take a look around the galleries and see if you can find any other animals without arms and legs that have evolved from animals that had them?