



African Snakebite Institute

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6 May 2013

REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

Deadly exotic snakes in captivity

Laws governing the keeping of snakes in captivity in South Africa are rather messy and there have been some attempts by certain provinces to streamline legislation. On a national level the State Veterinarians offices also have certain rules and regulations that affect the importation of reptiles. Most provinces have restrictions on the keeping of South African snakes and require permits with the exception of KwaZulu-Natal where most snakes can still be kept without permits.

As for exotic snakes, most provinces have no laws governing the keeping of exotic snakes including those with potentially lethal venoms. There are rules governing the importation of exotic snakes but if snakes are smuggled into the country, they are deemed legal once they are here. It's all a bit messy and the end result is that the majority of snake keepers rather keep exotic snakes to avoid having to jump through various hoops for permits. The industry has exploded in recent years as can be seen at the SOS Reptile Show that was held at Emperors Palace Casino this past weekend. There are thousands of people keeping exotic snakes and it is not unheard of for keepers to pay as much as R30,000 for a single snake.

Many of these keepers have potentially deadly exotic snakes in their collections and I estimate that there are as many as 80-100 potentially deadly exotic snakes in private collections in this country. Most of these keepers have no antivenom and in a case of someone being bitten there could be serious problems. Even more so if one of these deadly exotics escapes and bites a third party. There have been numerous escapes of exotics and it is quite common to find Corn snakes, King snakes, Boas and Burmese pythons in suburban gardens throughout South Africa. The odd deadly exotic has also been caught and this is of great concern.

On Saturday morning one of our experienced snake handlers in Cape Town was bitten by a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake in his collection. He was rushed to hospital and it was clear that it was a very serious bite. As antivenom for Rattlesnakes is not freely available in this country, 15 vials were located at Hartebeespoortdam Snake Park and flown down to the Cape. It was administered several hours after the bite and was clearly needed, as the swelling had extended from the hand up the arm to the shoulder and chest. I am not sure what the cost of the antivenom is but estimate that it is around R75,000.00. As antivenoms of exotic snakes are not registered drugs in this country and

regarded as experimental drugs, their cost is not covered by medical aid companies. A keeper that was bitten by an American Cottonmouth last year had to fork out R120,000 for antivenom.

The cost of antivenom for the bite of an exotic snake is one issue – the other issue is obviously availability and as we do not have a central antivenom bank in this country, there is a chance that you can receive a bite from a deadly exotic snake and have no access to antivenom. And in very serious bites antivenom may be required to save the victims life.

The issue of deadly exotic snakes in captivity has been discussed for years and this seems to be a bit of a time bomb. The sooner the authorities address this issue, the better. Some countries overseas and States in the USA regulate the keeping the deadly exotics by compelling keepers to have a certain amount of hours of experience working with the snakes as well as strict cage requirements and access to antivenom. Many other countries have prohibited the keeping of any deadly snakes. I just hope that it will not take the death of an innocent party of keeper for this to receive the attention that it deserves.

T-Shirts, caps and stickers

The African Snakebite Institute T-shirts, caps and stickers were launched last week and were available at the SOS Reptile Show. Please E-mail me if you would like to receive a price list.

Courses

Bloemfontein – Saturday 11 May 2013. Please E-mail me for more particulars

Heia Safari Ranch, Gauteng – Saturday 08 June 2013. Please E-mail me for more particulars

Durban – to be announced. If you would like to attend the next Durban snake course, please E-mail me for more particulars.

Kind regards,

Johan Marais

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