

TEN YEARS OF SERPO

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992 SERPO celebrated 10 years of existence. The editors of *Litteratura Serpentina* felt that this was a sufficient reason for them to review, together with the Director of SERPO, Walter Getreuer, the history of a travelling exhibition that contains around 100 live snakes, which is an unique attraction, and not for herpetologists alone.

There is more behind the SERPO enterprise than just the travelling exhibition, which many snake keepers have undoubtedly visited at least once. But as this is the way in which most of us know of SERPO, I think it is appropriate to outline the realisation and maintenance of this herpetological attraction first. After that, I will review Walter Getreuer's ample supplementary occupations in the field of herpetology.

BUREAUCRACY

Preceding his initiative of exhibiting snakes on a commercial basis, Walter Getreuer was heavily involved with the Italian Atrox-exhibition. which used to visit the Netherlands several years ago. Amongst other things, he took care of Atrox's public relations and made the exhibition more educational. It was the latter aspect that raised the idea of establishing an exhibition of his own. As a matter of fact, those who visit SERPO do get, besides the opportunity to see more than one hundred snakes, an abundance of information about these animals. Information that can remove a lot of prejudices in the average visitor, and above all, enriches him with a lot of facts that are well worth knowing. In this way, SERPO acquits itself of its educational task very meritoriously.

The actual founding of his exhibiton has definitely not been an easy task for Walter Getreuer. Just like any new entrepreneur, he needed financial help from a bank. You can probably imagine the way in which they propably reacted (not to mention *laughed*) when the request for financial support for a *snake-exhibition* came up for discussion. For lack of precedents, it took a lot of effort to convince the gentlemen of the viability of Walter's plans.

Not only in respect of banking has Walter Getreuer been a trendsetter, this was also the way with regards to the insurance aspects of his company. It has taken a lot before an insurance company could estimate the risk they were taking, because of the lack of comparable cases within a non-existing branch, and could calculate a reasonable premium for example; legal responsibility, consequential loss, and of course transportation/residence insurance.

Exhibiting in municipalities means requesting permits. Again, a snake exhibition seems to be a difficult item, this time for the officials. Because there are no other similar exhibitions, local Common Police Regulations are usually incompletely formulated for such an activity. In former

days, SERPO exhibitions were regularly visited by officials from a municipality where a request for an exhibition was presented. In this way they could pass judgement on the objectivity of SERPO.

When the first exhibition is successful this experience can be a beneficial reference to other municipalities. For that matter, Walter Getreuer isn't afraid to treat a municipality who persists in its refusal, on an Arob-procedure (a special Dutch juridical procedure). On the rare occasions when this was necessary, it turned out in his favour. But in general, officials are quite co-operative.

The absence of any equality in the handling of municipal charges is very annoying. In fact, a considerable difference exists in the precario-rights (a special Dutch tax) and legal charges, a municipality charges for the issuing of the required permits and exemptions.

A conversation with a tax official was very interesting. How does one write off a snake? Are the offspring capital gains? What to do about study-trips abroad that could easily be mistaken for a holiday? How do you deduct the cost of a holiday, when it appears to be a herpetological study trip as well? Walter Getreuer has also been a fiscal tredsetter!

In the beginning even the transportation of SERPO was a problem in a bureaucratic sense. To trucks that demonstrably use the Dutch roads for a limited period, a so-called '60 days permit' offers the possibility to avoid paying the full road tax. Again, officials were surprised when SERPO asked for such a permit. The initial demand to equip the truck and trailer combination with a special clutch was withdrawn when it became clear that a broken down trailer, filled with live snakes, amongst which were some extremely venomous ones, could bear a serious risk if it couldn't be taken in tow immediately by another truck.



Foto 1: SERPO's Reptielen Zoo.

Nowadays, co-operation with the local press or regional broadcasting station is inevitable for achieving success. With every exhibition, the aforementioned institutions are asked to give the necessary publicity to it. In Walter Getreuer's point of view, this is done all too minimally, once in a while. A conversation with the editor in charge can sometimes induce a pleasurable change in that person's appreciation for the exhibition and for snakes in general. However, all of these things can be time consuming.

A nice attendant problem was, initially, his neighbour, who, after discovering that Walter Getreuer kept snakes, threatened to have the police put an end to that 'life-threatening' situation. This neighbour, who appeared to be very skilful, is now one of Walter's regular co-operators!

The examples of official and bureaucratic procedures illustrate what kind of job it is in starting a snake exhibition, even when it's only on paper. By now, Walter Getreuer has become that well-known that in several places in the Netherlands an exhibition can be arranged in no time at all. In addition it is culturally as well as educationally very attractive. People also like to see the exhibition coming to their municipality, because it attracts a lot of people who in general cause no annoyance to the community and the neighbours: there are usually no noisy hooligans and most visitors are educated enough not to leave any litter behind. One of these hospitable cities is Maastricht, where Walter Getreuer was exhibiting for the fourth time at the time of his interview. His experience, however, has taught him to be careful when institutions take things into their own hands and ask him and his snake exhibition over. Usually many kinds of problems appear to be present, which can make exhibiting snakes less attractive, or even a financial loss. This can, for instance, happen when a neighbourhood that was formerly reduced to poverty, wants to create a new image, or vice versa when a once respectable institution is in decline and desperately tries to stop the decline. Prostitutes in front of the door, or visitor's cars wrecked, are things that are better avoided. That is why it is necessary to be well informed about the institution, neighbourhood and inhabitants beforehand.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

The practical problems are of an entirely different calibre. For Walter Getreuer it came in very useful that he had studied electronics for a while, after being drawn to veterinary science. This education allowed him to design and realise almost everything that, from a technical point of view, is concerned with his snake exhibition, by himself. This applies to the vivaria, in addition to the computer programs that can be played at the exhibition, the necessary herpetological attributes (e.g. snake hooks), the realisation of video films, the development of incubators, the climate control inside the vivaria and the interior of his trailer.

His vivaria are extremely well secured. Nowhere on the outside is anything like a screw that can be jiggled loose, and the quality of the glass is best compared to show-cases in which jewellers keep their diamonds. And heating and lighting is taken care of in a cunning way. Besides all of this, the undercarriage of the vivaria is constructed in such a way that they are very hard to push over. As an extra safety measure, the vivaria containing the dangerous snakes are always placed against the walls instead of in the middle of the exhibition room, and in addition they are situated close to the pay desk. The visitors are also forced to stand at a proper distance from the glass panels by a balustrade. Finally, the vivaria are placed in such a way that there are no 'dead ends', passages where visitors have to walk in and out again to get to the next exhibit. In the centre, the vivaria are always placed back to back and the space between these and the other vivaria is big enough to prevent people from standing in each other's way.

The trailer is a different story. Because livestock has to be transported in it, it requires special adaptations. There has to be heating and ventilation, and if the trailer was unexpectedly involved

in an accident, it has to be impossible that at no time would mambas and rattlesnakes be testing the coldbloodedness of police and firemen.

OTHER HERPETOLOGICAL OCCUPATIONS

Walter Getreuer maintains \pm 90 different species of snakes, in total about 300 individuals. A large number of these are venomous. Walter Getreuer has been handling venomous snakes since he was 16 years old. The fact that he has never been bitten proves that he does it very carefully and that he is very capable. He has double sera for each of the venomous species. These sera are primarily meant for calamities within SERPO (personnel and visitors) and not for keepers of venomous snakes somewhere in the country who carelessly handled their snakes.

Despite the fact that he owns a lot of venomous snakes, and could therefore supply venom to the pharmaceutical industry, Walter Getreuer renounces this. The number of venomous snakes he owns, from a single species, is too limited to commercially obtain venom. Besides which, he cares too much for his animals. You take away something which they are very economical of, and in addition the stress-inducing methods (i.e. the administration of electrical stimuli, rough massage) that are used in snake farms for example to milk the snakes, are not agreeable to him. An exception is made for venom used for scientific research and educational purposes. Nowadays, a lot of snake venom is offered by countries which used to be behind the Iron Curtain.

SERPO owns 4-15 specimens of each species. Through that, the animals can be used alternatively for the exhibition, and they can be used for breeding. The latter is done on a commercial basis. For instance, snakes are exported. Walter Getreuer also places them at the disposal of advertising campaigns, tv shows, video clips, etc. He is often approached by directors who would like to use his herpetological knowledge or his animals. In addition he likes to give lectures to children, but he doesn't avoid such a performance for the World Wildlife Fund either.

The fact that Walter Getreuer attaches a great deal of importance to the educational aspect of his exhibition is already mentioned above. Besides the exhibition itself, he also works otherwise on the removal of prejudices concerning snakes. Outside the appealing season, to his liking he is working with schools. Special packs have been designed that can be used by biology teachers in their classes, and if they wish Walter will come and explain something. A different point of view is formed with modern video technology: SERPO develops videos that are very worthwhile, even for the more advanced viewer. An example of this expertise can be seen at the exhibition.

In the meantime, all over the country, people benefit from his expertise. He takes care of a course in snake identification for AID officials; he assists Schiphol police when there is a well-founded suspicion concerning the contents of a case; he helps bailiffs at an address where besides the furniture, herpetological items are also present; he advises municipalities where one didn't foresee any herpetological eventualities, while amending the Common Police Regulations; he will also go and try to identify, together with an assistant, what kind of snake it was that a snake keeper's neighbour saw crawling behind the firewood.

Furthermore, he always carries a beeper; that is because he is continuously on standby in case of a calamity in which snakes are involved. In the Netherlands, snake keepers regularly get bitten by a venomous snake. Hospitals, government institutions, etc., know where to find him, for a first diagnosis and some medical advice. Quite often in such cases, Walter witnesses some hectic scenes. These events with complete strangers really move him emotionally.

Walter Getreuer is highly irritated by the way some people in the Netherlands deal with snakes. Sometimes he encounters the most amazing things; people buy a snake in a bar, put it under a shower to get it clean, and open a tin of cat food without having even the slightest idea of what they have bought. He has been in attics where large numbers of mambas were kept, and one of those animals was crawling around freely.

When he watches an entertainment show on tv and sees some tough men carrying around (ill) snakes, the next day he talks to the director in charge and usually the result is that the station drops the act unless it is perfectly clear that the animals will not be maltreated.

SOME SUPPLEMENTARY BUSINESS

At home, Walter Getreuer only keeps two anoles. The hundreds of snakes he owns are stored in a place that is only known to a few people, and where not everyone will be allowed in. Here too, experience has been his tutor.

In its ten years of existence, SERPO had to get over a major disappointment; in 1983 the snake house burnt out, and 70 animals died. This caused an argument with the insurance company - again, how does one write off a snake?

For maintaining the menagerie, every year 15000 mice, 3000 rats and hundreds of rabbits are necessary. A major portion are supplied by T.N.O., with which a close symbiosis has been formed. Should there be a shortage, then it will be compensated for by buying animals at public sales or from private persons.

Within the European Snake Society, Walter Getreuer is the person who supervises the venomous snake section during the Snake Day. Now and then he sends some news out in the form of an article, but only when he has something genuinely new to report. He profoundly dislikes authors who solely base themselves on others and hardly have anything to add. In connection to this it seems appropriate to announce a contribution about the behaviour and reproduction of the desert cobra, *Walterinnesia aegyptia*, of which he has recently discovered some interesting aspects. Besides that, it concerns a snake that has recently been bred in captivity for the first time. He also participates in the diseases working group of our Belgian sister association 'Terra.'

FUTURE PLANS

I myself became acquainted with SERPO for the first time in Scheveningen, where was a permanent exhibition sited in the basement of the shopping centre. For more than one reason this place wasn't ideal, that is why SERPO left there. Instead, Walter Getreuer will open a grand reptile house under the name of SERPO'S REPTILE ZOO in Delft, in the middle of April 1993. In this reptile house there will be on view, in addition to snakes and crocodiles which will make up the majority of the inhabitants, other representatives of the order of reptiles. Next to the livestock there will be a room for a herpetologically-based natural history museum, in a part of this new, permanent exhibition.

SERPO'S REPTILE ZOO is located at the station square in Delft, less than 75 metres from the railway station. Luckily, Walter Getreuer doesn't restrict himself to just this permanent place, his travelling SERPO exhibition will keep on visiting the most diverse locations in the Netherlands.

The editors of *Litteratura Serpentina* and the committee of the *European Snake Society* congratulate Walter and his co-operators on their 10th anniversary, and wish them all the best for the future.