

AN EXHIBITION OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES ON CYPRUS

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Contents: Preface - background - The design of the exhibition - Enumeration of the present snake species - Visiting the exhibition - Conclusion.

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PREFACE

As the title indicates this exhibition, the initiative of Hans Joerg Wiedl concerns both amphibians and reptiles. In this article I will limit myself to the reptiles, and since this is a snake-magazine, only the snakes. This choice is also justified by the fact that the snake is the most threatened animal species of Cyprus.

BACKGROUND

About twenty years ago Hans Joerg Wiedl, Austrian by birth, visited Cyprus. The country stole his heart, both socially and herpetologically. Therefore he decided to return to it and settle down. Quickly Hans realised that both tourists and the local population had little or no respect for the local fauna, especially for the snakes. They were considered to be dangerous, filthy, venomous and a threat to humans and animals. Hans decided to start the endless task to make the population aware that the snake, something that you as a reader of *Litteratura Serpenti* already know, isn't the dangerous, threatening animal that they thought it was. At first he had to fight against a lot of bureaucratic resistance to get the licences to start an exhibition. When, after a lot of effort, he succeeded, he started looking for money-lenders and volunteers to finance the exhibition and to keep it going. An enormous job in a country where the snake has such a negative image. After numerous lectures, conversations, correspondences and arguments he finally succeeded in his intention. Financially there was enough ability to bear, authorities approved, licences were extracted and volunteers were available.

Then the search for a suitable location began. It ended at Skoulli, a little town in the northeast of Cyprus. Suitable by its auspicious situation at a through road and also by the presence of enough wilderness to catch the animals he needed himself. Slowly but surely the terrariums became better filled and the exhibition started to take shape. Every now and then a local resident even came to it with an injured or captured animal.

However, it wasn't only negative points that, at the start of the exhibition, delayed or counteracted things; there are also positive circumstances which advanced the realising of the exhibition. Such as the fact that there was no need for a roof, because the animals were caught in the same area in which they were exhibited. For the same reason there was no need to construct light and heating. This was provided by using a roof of wire-netting. As well as this it was apparent that word of mouth publicity and the co-operation of the

authorities did its job. This became evident from the numbers of visitors which increased yearly from 40 persons in the first year up to one thousand in the third year. Of course not enough to cover all expenses, but thanks to the previously mentioned money-lenders and volunteers and the fact that the prey-animals could be caught in the neighbourhood, the expenses stayed relatively low. There was also a small book published in which the exhibition was explained and also an enumeration of the amphibians and reptiles of Cyprus.

THE DESIGN OF THE EXHIBITION

A: Protecting the threatened animal species of Cyprus. The animals are not only threatened by the loss of habitat, but also by tourism, the use of pesticides and, above all, by hunters. Since the hunters nowadays have the use of off-road vehicles, they can reach almost every remote place and kill everything that comes in sight.

Only by information it is possible to effect a fundamental change in the attitude of the population, so that this massacre can be halted. To achieve this, the choice is made to attain the target-group of the future, namely the children. Thanks to co-operation of the authorities it is possible to give lectures on schools, place information in newspapers and make use of radio- and television-broadcast time.

B: To inform the population of Cyprus, especially the children, about the value and the profit of a herpetological fauna. The exhibition is often visited by schools from the whole of Cyprus and this aspect of biological teaching becomes more and more popular. There is an extended programme that is followed: the distribution of free posters for schools (financed by the Ministry of Education), regular radio- and television-broadcast time, providing information to hospitals and above all increasing the perception and importance of the roll of these animals in the Cypriot environment.

C: The constant scientific research that takes place in the field, to maintain specific animal species of Cyprus and the exchange of data with other countries. Accurate knowledge of the Cypriot herpetofauna however is not yet complete. Many questions are still open, such as the locality of existing populations of some species, their way of life, way of feeding themselves and mating behaviour. They will try to improve this by maintaining correspondence with inland and foreign universities.

ENUMERATION OF THE PRESENT SNAKE SPECIES

Abbreviations: C = Class, O = Order, F = Family, Sf = Subfamily, S = Species, R = range, H = habitat, P = prey.

C: Reptilia

O: Serpentes

F: Typhlopidae

S: *Typhlops vermicularis* Merrem:1820

R: Balkan, Cyprus, Near and Middle East

H: dry, bare, open areas in the plains, also in hilly ground

P: worms, small insects, ants and their larvae

non-poisonous

C: Reptilia

O: Serpentes

F: Colubridae

S: *Coluber jugularis* Linnaeus:1758

R: Rhodes and other Asia Minor islands, the Near East

H: dry, intensely sunny terrain in flat, hilly and mountainous country

P: small mammals (rats and mice), birds, snakes and other reptiles
non-poisonous

C: Reptilia

O: Serpentes

F: Colubridae

S: *Coluber nummifer* Reuss:1834

R: Cyprus, S-Anatolia, W-Syria, Lebanon, Israël, N-Egypt, as far as the Nile

H: dry areas with boulders and some bushes

P: mice, reptiles and birds
non-poisonous

C: Reptilia

O: Serpentes

F: Colubridae

S: *Coluber cypriensis* Schaetti:1985

R: Cyprus, endemic, rare



Foto 1: *Malpolon monspessulanus*. Foto: C.C. de Haan.

H: dry, stony terrain with bushes. Preferably in the vicinity of streams
P: lizards and insects
non-poisonous

C: Reptilia
O: Serpentes
F: Colubridae Sf: Boiginae
S: *Telescopus fallax* Fleischmann 1831
R: widespread in the eastern mediterranean lands
H: marshy areas near streams
P: lizards, young mice
poisonous

C: Reptilia
O: Serpentes
F: Colubridae Sf: Boiginae
S: *Malpolon nonspessulanus* Hermann:1804
R: S-Europe, N-Africa and SW-Asia
H: flat, also hilly terrain, with short grass and with undergrowth
P: rats, mice, birds, snakes and lizards
poisonous

C: Reptilia
O: Serpentes
F: Viperidae
S: *Vipera lebetina* Linnaeus:1758
R: Cyclades islands, S-Anatolia, Near and Middle-East
H: steppe-like terrain with boulders and bushes: on hills running alongside streams
P: rats, mice, birds, lizards and occasional snakes
highly poisonous
This is the only snake of Cyprus whose bite can be fatal without correct treatment.

VISITING THE EXHIBITION

It is of course always possible to visit the exhibition when you are on Cyprus. From Paphos there is only one road to the north, a road comparable with our provincial roads. After a journey of about 45 minutes you will drive through the small village Skoulli. On the right side of the road you will see the exhibition, it is also indicated by signs. In 1993 the admission was 75 cents, an amount that we probably can afford. However, don't expect 'Serpo', because it is not that large or pretty, but it is certainly worth a visit when you are in the neighbourhood.

When you are lucky like me in 1993, Hans himself is present. Initially he will be suspicious, but once he knows that you are a snake-lover, you can talk endlessly with this man and can expect to hear some funny or interesting anecdotes, like the following which he told me: Hans was once approached by a tourist who told him that he was looking for tarantulas, because they could make him much money in his homeland. Hans appeared interested in the request and then sent him to an area where absolutely no tarantulas live.

CONCLUSIONS

You'll understand my great respect for this man who disinterestedly, and purely out of love for the animals spends his time, energy and money, to recover, before it's too late, what is being destroyed. There is, however, still much work left, but the correct path has been taken. So if you are ever on Cyprus (something I can certainly recommend), be sure to visit the 'EXHIBITION OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES'. Hans assured me that he is always pleased with any form of information, sympathy, financial contributions or communication whatever. You can write to: Hans Joerg Wiedl, P.O.Box 2133, Paphos, Cyprus.