

A

SNAKE PARK IN NAMIBIA



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INTRODUCTION

During my travel in Namibia, I looked for snakes both in wild and in snake parks or other. In another article published on *Litteratura Serpentina* (Cimatti 2001) I described some snakes found in wild: in this one, I want to speak about the only snake park which I visited. In fact, at Swakopmund I found a nice place where I could see many different species of Namibian snakes: it was an unique occasion to see and to understand better the reptiles of Namibia, which are often few known by people, specially in Europe.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Stuart and Sarah Hebbard came from South Africa. Stuart had already an interest in snakes and also in birds, but he left off when he got married. When their children got a 'suitable' age, Stuart and Sarah started keeping some tame snakes, as African House Snake (*Lamprophis fuliginosus*), Common Egg-eater Snake (*Dasypeltis scabra*) and Southern African Python (*Python nataliensis*). In 1992 they moved from South Africa to Namibia and they had the idea to set up a 'snake park', where the people could find and observe the rare snakes of Namibia. But this beautiful idea was not easy to realize: many letters, faxes and visits to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) were necessary to obtain a permit to keep and display snakes. This 'bureaucratic adventure' was going on for six months. In fact it is important to remember that in

Namibia it is forbidden to buy, to sell, to export or to import wild animals without a permit, and generally these are not given for reptiles.

Finally the snake park was born, and it was called 'Living Desert Snake Park'. In the beginning the park was run by Stuart and two youngest children only, while Sarah, not being a 'snake person', preferred to not participate directly. Then both children grew up and married, and they left home and ... snake park. Because Stuart worked in another full-time job, the Snake Park was 'inherited' by Sarah, who was compelled to become an excellent 'snake person'.

HOW THE LIVING DESERT SNAKE PARK WORKS

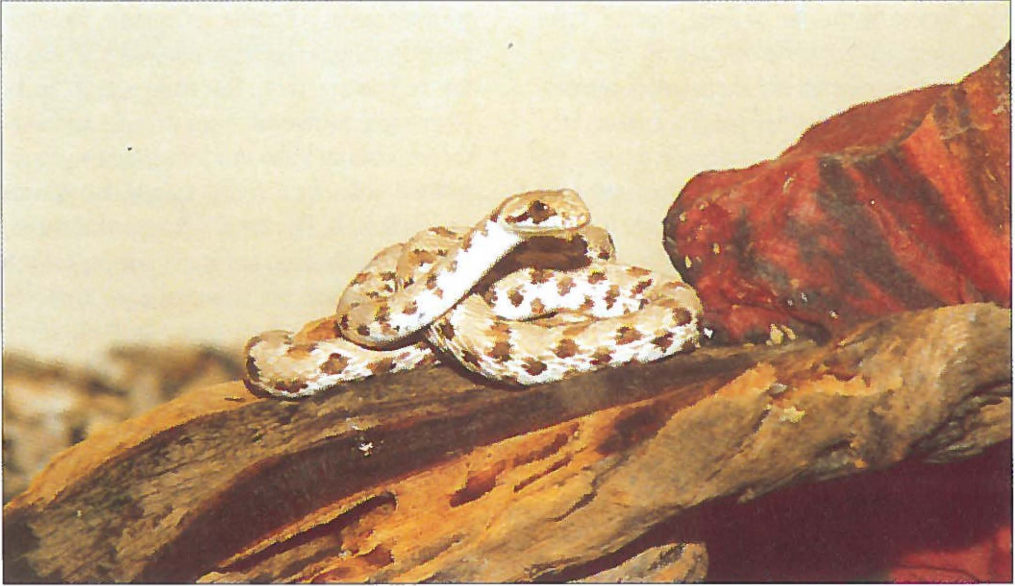
Stuart and Sarah found themselves most of their snakes, or sometimes they were brought to them by interested persons. At the moment of my visit they had 25 types of snakes and a good variety of chameleons, geckos, lizards, monitors, scorpions and spiders (*Parabuthus* sp.). Some snakes are very rare and their biology and breeding are really few known, as Desert Mountain Adder (*Bitis xeropaga*) and Western Keeled Snake (*Pythonodipsas carinata*); others are common in Namibia, as Mole Snake (*Pseudaspis cana*), Horned Adder (*Bitis caudalis*) and Whip Snakes belonging to *Psammophis* genus. In Table 1 and 2 the main reptiles of the 'Living Desert Snake Park' are shown. They keep some animals such as chameleons and some snakes for a while: if they start losing condition, they release them immediately. Other reptiles, especially some snakes, have bred successfully, although they do not try to encourage this. For example, during 1999 a Southern African Python female (*Python nataliensis*) laid eggs: 17 newborns hatched, but only 8 are still li-



Naja nivea. Photo: Stuart Hebbard



Dendroaspis polylepis. Photo: Stuart Hebbard



Dipsina multimaculata. Photo: Stuart Hebbard



Aspidelaps lubricus. Photo: Stuart Hebbard

ving. Because the male was an illegal 'imported' snake (it was from northeastern Transvaal, South Africa), the Ministry of Environment and Tourism would not allow to release newborns in the wild. So, most of baby pythons, together with other captive-bred snakes (as *Pseudaspis cana* and *Lamprophis fuliginosus*) have been given to various local institutions only (i.e. University of Namibia), while no snakes can be given, exported or sold out of Namibia.

Actually Stuart and Sarah have indoor cages only, with U.V. lights and under floor heating; between their future projects, some outdoor cages (for local animals only) are expected. Snakes mainly feed on mice and rats, but some 'lizard feeders' (as *Psammophis* sp., *Bitis peringueyi* and *Telescopus beetzii*) feed on wild-caught geckos, skinks and lizards. Sometimes they work with photojournalists and video crews, and they do tours and safaris with emphasis on nature and photography. Schools and other groups visit them often, trying to help people understand that not only dead snakes are good snakes, that chameleons and geckos are not deadly and that rock monitors are not all to be eaten. They carry out a very hard 'battle', on behalf of disliked reptiles.

SOME CURIOSITIES

Stuart told me that his Tiger Snake could apparently be a new species or subspecies, because it has characteristics not yet described; it is very similar to the Beetz's Tiger Snake (*Telescopus beetzii*), but it is still not clear if it really belongs to this species.

At the 'Living Desert Snake Park', many snakes belonging to *Psammophis* genus are kept: they are commonly called 'sand', 'grass' or 'whip' snake, and there

are many species in Namibia. For example, the Stripe-bellied Sand Snake (*Psammophis subtaeniatus*) lives in the northeastern area. The Western Sand Snake (*Psammophis trigrammus*) is present in the northwestern area while the Karoo Sand Snake (*Psammophis notostictus*) occurs from central area to the extreme south of Namibia. They are all slender and fast snakes, which eat mainly skinks and lizards, but they can also catch small rodents and other snakes. At the 'Living Desert Snake Park', a large specimen of Western Sand Snake (*Psammophis trigrammus*) has eaten a Karoo Sand Snake (*Psammophis notostictus*), which has been put temporarily together in the same cage.

Stuart told me that he does not have an unique favourite reptile. He very much likes a Rock Monitor (*Varanus albigularis*), which is very tame and many tourists would like to take it home with them! Also some large Southern African Pythons (*Python natalensis*) are very nice and tame, and they can be handled well despite their bad reputation. He very much likes the Black Mamba (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) too, but it is too dangerous to be considered a 'good pet'.

At last Stuart narrated me some curious and funny snake's superstitions well known in Namibia. He said that there is a legendary adder, and it is called 'coil-spring adder' (*Bitis spiralexii*): if it needs a quick escape, it forms a spring and it starts bouncing right over a house if necessary. Besides there is the 'hoop snake' (*Psammophis perelli*) which grabs its tail in its mouth, forms a 'tyre' and rolls away at great speed.

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COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Southern African Python	<i>Python nataliensis</i>
Desert Mountain Adder	<i>Bitis xeropaga</i>
Horned Adder	<i>Bitis caudalis</i>
Many-horned Adder	<i>Bitis cornuta</i>
Péringuey's Adder	<i>Bitis peringueyi</i>
Puff Adder	<i>Bitis arietans</i>
Black Mamba	<i>Dendroaspis polylepis</i>
Cape Cobra	<i>Naja nivea</i>
Coral Snake	<i>Aspidelaps lubricus infuscatus</i>
Coral Snake	<i>Aspidelaps lubricus lubricus</i>
Mozambique Spitting Cobra	<i>Naja mossambica</i>
Snouted [Anchieta's] Cobra	<i>Naja annulifera anchietae</i>
Western Barred Spitting Cobra	<i>Naja nigricollis nigricincta</i>
Betz's Tiger Snake	<i>Telescopus beetzii</i> (?)
Boomslang	<i>Dispholidus typus typus</i>
Brown House Snake	<i>Lamprophis fuliginosus</i>
Common Egg-Eater Snake	<i>Dasypeltis scabra</i>
Dwarf Beaked Snake	<i>Dipsina multimaculata</i>
Mole Snake	<i>Pseudaspis cana</i>
Sand and Grass Snake	<i>Psammophis</i> sp.
Western Keeled Snake	<i>Pythonodipsas carinata</i>

Tab. 1. Snakes of the 'Living Desert Snake Park'

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Cape Dwarf Chameleon	<i>Bradypodion pumilum</i>
Carp's Barking Gecko	<i>Ptenopus carpi</i>
Giant Ground Gecko	<i>Chondrodactylus angulifer</i>
Namaqua Chameleon	<i>Chamaeleon namaquensis</i>
Ovambo Tree Skink	<i>Mabuya binotata</i>
Rock Monitor	<i>Varanus albigularis</i>
Web-footed Gecko	<i>Palmatogeco rangei</i>

Tab. 2. Other reptiles kept at the "Living Desert Snake Park".



Naja mossambica. Photo: Stuart Hebbard




Python nataliensis. Photo: Stuart Hebbard



Dispholidus typus. Photo: Stuart Hebbard



Bitis caudalis. Photo: Stuart Hebbard



anectodes on their activities and experiences. I am indebted to Stuart for his unreplacable photographic contribution.

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Corrections by Mark Wootten

