

SNAKES ARE DANGEROUS, BUT

In Western Australia slightly less than half of the total number of species of snakes are legally protected. This protection is afforded to the non-venomous and the relatively harmless back-fanged snakes. With the current favourable attitude of the public towards conservation is it expecting too much to hope that one day all our snakes will be protected?

Reptiles—and snakes in particular—have always been the subject of ill-informed and superstitious beliefs. The general loathing of snakes that exists among large sections of the community is the result of misguided education, and in children fear and misunderstanding of snakes are usually the result of the attitude of well-intentioned adults who were similarly influenced in their childhood. The attitude of the media does little to disperse these fears, for the occasional fatality from snake-bite is afforded a degree of hysterical publicity out of all proportion to the incidence of such occurrences. In fact, Australia's venomous snakes are responsible for an average of only about four deaths each year. Western Australian motorists might care to make the obvious comparison!

It is easy to see why snakes invoke a sense of fear in Australians, for of 110 different kinds of land snakes indigenous to the continent, there are over seventy varieties with venom glands and fangs; and taking the ratio of venomous to non-venomous land snakes, Australia has the dubious distinction of having the highest proportion of venomous land snakes in the world. It would appear that death awaits the unwary at almost every encounter. Yet in truth only a small percentage of snakes are dangerous to man; most of the technically venomous snakes are small innocuous creatures with venom of only sufficient strength to kill their prey—lizards and frogs, but mostly insects. In addition, most Australian snakes are wary and shy, and given the opportunity will flee when man approaches. If cornered or attacked they will naturally defend themselves; it is this characteristic which has given species such as the Tiger Snake and the Taipan their reputation for aggressiveness.

The venomous land-snakes are of the family *Elipidae*. Snakes of this family are found in all the continents of the world and include such species as the African Cobra and Mamba, the Asian Krait and American coral snakes. The Australian species which are known to have inflicted fatal bites are the Taipan, Death Adders, Tiger Snakes, Brown Snakes, Copperhead, Mulga, Red-bellied Black Snake, Spotted Black Snake and the Rough-scaled Snake. These species are listed

roughly in the order of the average amount of venom which each injects. Whether a bite proves fatal depends a lot on the physical condition of the victim, (some people will react violently to a "harmless" snake), and subsequent medical action, but it is worth noting that the venom of the Taipan and the Tiger Snake is more potent than that of the more infamous snakes of other continents mentioned above.

In the light of the public's attitude and the fact that some snakes are very deadly indeed, overall protection is hardly ever likely to be introduced; nor would it be really practicable except in specific areas such as reserves. Yet snakes form an integral part of the ecology of the continent; they are predators on rodent pests and have other important roles to play in preserving the balance of the environment. Since they will not attack unless unnecessarily provoked or disturbed, is it unreasonable to suggest that even dangerous snakes should not be wantonly destroyed? In the bush they can be left alone; only when some potential danger exists should they then be humanely destroyed.

Conservationists, educators and Honorary Wardens can play their part by instilling in others a sensible awareness of the importance of snakes in the overall scheme of nature. Make sure that you can recognise the snakes in your area; and be familiar with first-aid treatment of their bites.

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE AUTHORITY

By notice in the *Government Gazette*, October 8, 1971, the following persons were appointed members of the Western Australian Wild Life Authority for a period of three years from 1st June, 1971:

Ex Officio Members:—

- Mr Bernard Kenneth Bowen, Director of Fisheries and Fauna, Chairman;
- Mr Harold Baxter Sandford Shugg, Chief Warden of Fauna and Deputy Chairman;
- Mr Alfred Richard Tomlinson, Chief Vermin Control Officer; and
- Mr William Roy Wallace, Conservator of Forests.

Appointed Members:—

- Mr Robert Dunlop Royce, botanist of South Perth;
- Professor Albert Russell Main, zoologist of Nedlands;
- Dr Dominic Louis Serventy, zoologist of Nedlands;
- Dr William David Lindsay Ride, of Nedlands;
- Mr Angus Hargreaves Robinson, of Coolup;
- Mr Neville Anderson Beeck, of Katanning; and
- Mr Henry George Hall, of Dangin.