



African Snakebite Institute

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REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

It has been a particularly busy snakebite season with the main culprits the Mozambique Spitting Cobra (*Naja mossambica*), the Puff Adder (*Bitis arietans arietans*) and the Stiletto Snake (*Atractaspis bibronii*). As snakebites are not reported anywhere it is always difficult to obtain information about bites unless something appears in the popular press or on one of the social networks. I am also in touch with a number of doctors and hospitals who feed through information.

The biggest culprit when it comes to snakebite in Southern Africa is the Mozambique Spitting Cobra. Part of the reason is that it is a very active snakes that goes around hunting for food and it often ends up in suburban gardens. What is quite scary is that a number of people get bitten in their houses, often while asleep. Nobody quite knows what the deal is and the likelihood is that the snakes end up in houses by accident. They hunt for food, get to a wall and turn right or left, then get to a gap under a door and accidentally enter. But the real puzzle is why so many people are getting bitten while asleep. One theory is that people move around a lot while sleeping and that the snake then bites in self-defence. Another theory is that the cobras are smelling people in the dark, not quite knowing how big a warm-blooded prey they are dealing with and that the bite is a feeding–response bite. Such bites are always worse as a fair amount of venom is injected as opposed to a defensive bite during which the snake may inject no venom or very little. Although many of these bites result in necrosis very few victims die.

Because of a number of bites that enjoy a great deal of press coverage (like my Puff Adder bite) we easily get a skewed picture of snakebites and this also taints our approach to first aid treatment. The vast majority of victims are poor labourers that work barefoot in fields and have very little access to medical care or ambulance services. It often takes the victims several hours to get to a clinic or doctor and they seldom know what snake was responsible. Not that it is a major problem as snakebite victims should not be treated for a specific snakebite but the physician should treat the symptoms. If one knows what snake was responsible it would help as one would know what symptoms you can expect. But the identity of the snake responsible is not vital.

Another problem with bites amongst rural people is that they seldom make it into the popular press and we seldom hear about such cases. And very few Black Mamba (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) bites are reported, either because these nervous but dangerous snakes are good at avoiding people and few

get bitten, or that victims actually die before they get to major hospitals and such deaths are never properly reported.

World-wide there are in the region of five million snakebites a year with around 100,000 deaths. One paper talks about 6,500 bites annually in Southern Africa but that could be much higher – we just don't have the data. Regarding deaths, we usually speak of around a dozen deaths per year for our region but that could also be as high as fifty.

NEW LOOK

I have established the ***African Snakebite Institute*** as you can see from the logo. There is a lot happening and the new website address is www.africansnakebiteinstitute.com. My webmaster has already loaded up two updated **Dangerous Snakes of Southern Africa** posters (free downloads) and Joleen Coetzee is busy with the German edition which will be followed by a Zulu edition. I am meeting with my webmaster this week to discuss a snakebite forum that will be linked to the website. More sections on first aid treatment will be added to the website and I am talking to various parties about new Apps. So watch this space!

SOS Reptile Expo, Emerald Casino, Emperor's Palace, Kempton Park

The ***African Snakebite Institute*** will have a stand at the above show, so please come and visit if you are in the area. I am busy with stickers and looking at branded T-shirts and caps. I will also have a variety of reptile books and posters on display, including the new **Snakes of Zimbabwe and Botswana**. And if you have any of my books, do bring them along for a signature.

EQUIPMENT

A new shipment of snake tongs have just arrived and includes a collapsible 2 m snake tong that is ideal for snakes high up in trees or roofs as well as under beds or furniture in chalets, houses and industrial buildings.

The shipment of Micro Bag Valve Masks should be here soon and I already have a number of orders.

SNAKE GAITERS

Turtleskin Snake Gaiters are manufactured in the USA and are now available locally at R1,450.00. They are light-weight, easy to wear and have been tested by myself against our venomous snakes including the Puff Adder. A good investment for fly-fishermen, hunters, hikers and people working in the field.

COURSES

Gauteng: The next Gauteng **Snake Awareness, Identification and First Aid for Snakebite** course takes place at Heia Safari Ranch this coming Saturday 20 April 2013. It is a morning course and will be followed by a **Venomous Snake Handling** course after lunch.

Durban: A **Snake Awareness, Identification, First Aid for Snakebite and Medical Treatment of Snakebite** course is being planned for 27 April in Durban – more to be announced soon. It is a morning course and will be followed by a **Venomous Snake Handling** course in the afternoon.

Bloemfontein: There are enough delegates for a course in Bloemfontein and a date will be announced soon. Please keep an eye on the website for dates or E-mail me for more particulars.

Kind regards,

Johan Marais

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