



African Snakebite Institute

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REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

One of the most popular snake myths is the story of the Black Mamba killing five or more cattle in a kraal within minutes. I have had numerous people on my courses and talks that claim to have witnessed this. Snakes often bite animals, especially dogs. Cats are far more intelligent and highly efficient at killing small snakes, often bringing half dead snakes into houses.. They seldom get bitten.

Sheep, cattle and horses also suffer many snake bites, especially from Puff Adders when the inquisitive animals stick their noses too close for comfort. While I have no doubt that many snakes have the ability to kill horses and adult cattle, it appears that the vast majority of these deaths cannot be attributed to snakebite. Animals die and unless an autopsy is done, it is very difficult to establish the cause of death. So-called fang punctures are not a good indication of snakebite but if an animal has a massively-swollen head the chances of it having being bitten by a Puff Adder are pretty good.

I spoke to Dr. Andrew Leisewitz from Onderstepoort who has a particular interest in snakebite on animals and deals with large numbers of bites on animals. He sees snakebite deaths in dogs and sheep but has not seen a single snakebite death amongst horses and cattle in many years. Most of the bites are Puff Adder bites and often result in massive swelling and necrosis. Animals respond well to antivenom treatment and seldom suffer allergic reactions. AS for dogs, they also respond well to antivenom especially if treated very soon after the bite but it is an expensive exercise with antivenom costing close on R900 a vial (10 ml) and several vials may be required in some cases. People often boast about their smart 'snake killer' dogs – most dogs are quite good at killing snakes like cobras and the Rinkhals but the Puff Adder is another story – it is one of the fastest striking snakes in Africa. So if your dog kills a lot of snakes, save up for another dog – it may just be a matter of time.

I also got some feedback from Prof Joseph Van Heerden, often rated as one of the very best veterinarians in Africa. Here is his response in an E-mail to Dr. Leisewitz when asked about snakebite on animals:

We see lots of snakebite cases, the majority by far in dogs and most of them Puff Adder bites. Less cobra bites and last year for the first time 4 Boomslang cases (3 were given the specific antiserum and survived and the remaining one died, bleeding because the owners could not afford treatment).

We also see horses being bitten by puff adders regularly and it is not unusual to get clusters of cases e.g. 6 inquisitive yearlings being bitten by the same puff adder. We treat all equine cases with antiserum and just about all horses survive despite the fact that they usually develop a severe swelling of the head with severe stridor. Over a period of 18 years and having seen probably more than 250 equine cases, we lost one adult horse and a less than 6 month old foal that died after having battled with it all day. And that was probably the only foal that we ever have had. Never had a cobra case in equines

We have never been asked to attend to a bovine, sheep or goat suffering from snake bite but on occasion farmers have reported snake bite cases in bovines

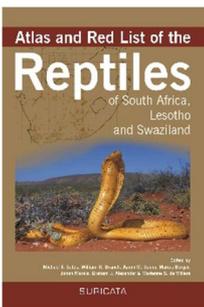
Only I suspected puff adder bite case in a cat that presented with extensive skin necrosis. Took a long time but completely recovered.

Treated a Puff Adder bite case in a buffalo cow and in a young sable heifer. Gave antiserum and both made uneventful recoveries. These were free ranging animals and the snakes were not seen but the swellings were typical: fairly acute onset; massive swelling. Both animals were depressed and appeared uncomfortable. Aspirates excluded abscessation, haematomas, etc.

I have never encountered or diagnosed a cobra bite in a large animal. Cannot see why they should be immune to the toxins but would probably need high dosages. We have managed to pull through a small number of dogs bitten by cobras especially if they were merely scratched by the snake and if we could manage to administer oxygen. Most cases however die en route to the surgery or die shortly after admission. On a number of times, owners have presented the wrong dog for treatment only to find the dog that was bitten lying dead next to the snake, when they return home.

I am receiving more and more case histories of snakebites amongst animals and hope to be in a position to share more information in the near future. But for now I still remain sceptical about the five head of cattle being killed by a Black Mamba.

Reptile Atlas



The Atlas and Red List of Reptiles of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland was launched on 16 April 2014. It is a phenomenal publication with contributions from 7 editors, 28 authors and several photographers. It includes species accounts of over 400 reptiles with up to date distribution maps, colour photographs and a conservation assessment for every reptile. Many people contributed to this publication but I would like to congratulate and thank Dr. Michael Bates of the National Museum in Bloemfontein who put in many hours over many years to ensure that the end product is without doubt one of the most important herpetological works ever to be produced in Africa. The printed copies (in hard cover) will be sold out within weeks but a CD with a PDF version is also available. Please E-mail me if you are interested in purchasing a book or CD.

Snakes and Venom Talk – EWT

I will be doing a talk on Snakes and Venom for the EWT on 6 May 2014

Courses

The next **Gauteng** Snake Awareness and Venomous Snake Handling Course in Gauteng takes place at Heia Safari Ranch on 03 May 2014. Please see the attachment or check out my website for more details. This course is registered with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa and registered health practitioners will earn CPD points.

Dangerous Snakes A3 Posters

The first batch of Dangerous Snakes' posters has now been completed and will be available as free downloads on my website shortly. These posters can also be ordered in printed form (A3) at R25.00 each including local postage/packaging. The series includes Dangerous Snakes posters for the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Mpumalanga, KZN, Zululand, Gauteng, Northwest, Free State, Limpopo, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Mozambique. Most are available in Afrikaans and English and we are working on German, Portuguese and Zulu versions as well. Another poster that will be available soon is Common Harmless Snakes of Southern Africa. And then I will be tackling the 55-odd African countries. My sincere thanks to Joleen Coetzee who has done an amazing job with the design of these posters.

SOS REPTILE EXPO

The annual SOS Reptile Expo takes place at Emperor's Casino on 10 and 11 May 2014 and as usual **The African Snakebite Institute** will have a stand with T-shirts, caps, books, stickers, snake tubes and a wide variety of snake handling equipment for sale. Printed copies of the various **Dangerous Snakes** posters will also be on sale. Hope to see you there.

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