A Reader’s Response to “Keeping Snakes in Captivity…”

I just checked the comments here and found this remarkable essay from a guy who grew up in Thailand and now lives in Germany. He keeps a snake, and he wanted to offer another perspective and counterpoint to my article, “Keeping Snakes in Captivity, and Selling Snakes.”

Thanks for this, it was a great read. I agree with most everything you’re doing. I do get that people who use snakes for education and research are doing the world a favor. I don’t however believe in keeping any animal – dog, cat, fish, bird, turtle, etc. To me it isn’t right to keep anything in captivity if I’m not also doing research or providing an educational service to others.

Here’s the comment – enjoy...

Hello Vern,

I’ve been knowing and following your Thailand snake related stuff for quite some time now and wanted to yell out a little Kudos to you first, before I start – for all the great and informative work you do and provide, keep on going!

Second: Nice entry this one, definitely some food for thought and I’m actually a little dumbfounded that this post had not receive any hate from outrageous, close-minded snake owners so far! Still, I felt the urge to add some thoughts since I myself, yes – do own a little snake. I’m not looking for any hassle but merely want to give some insights from someone of that „other side“. Needless to say that I can only speak for myself on this matter, but I still think (or rather hope) that this could provide an interesting point of view and that there
are other snake owners out there who share this sentiment of mine.

So, who am I, what do I do and why do I keep a snake? And how do I benefit to mankind in doing so?

I ain’t a certified zoologist/herpetologist – I’m an artist and photographer (who just happens to be specialized on snakes) in the first place, someone with a deep fascination for snakes of all kinds ever since (I grew up in Thailand, in direct neighbourhood with Retics, Kings and N. kaouthias, so I guess it just HAD to come that way). And an even deeper sadness for how hated these animals are.

So what do I do? I introduce people to snakes, with my art, with my photographies – and by gently getting people in touch with the actual animal (if they want to), giving them a chance to change their mind. I show them the beauty of a snake, I’ll let them touch their skin, I teach them that there is nothing horrible or despiteful about these things, I tell them all about the snakes from both my countries, Germany and Thailand, the great and often defining experiences that I had with their encounters, in other words: I own my snake not as a pair of fake balls, but for teaching purposes. My snake helps people getting rid of all the hate and prejudices.

I remember a person coming to me and telling me how amazed she was when she saw one of my snake photographies and how much „emotion this picture was able to convey“ – although it depicted a snake, something she had nothing left for but hate and it actually made her rethink; to me, it felt like the biggest achievement. Another case was a young girl, whose parents taught that every snake on sight needs to be killed; she had the largest excitement and wonder in her eyes when she touched my snake and realized that this long noodle in her hands wasn’t the vicious thing of her parent’s tales but an animal that deserves respect like any other creature. If I can make a person change his or her mind about snakes, preventing
them from killing them next time they see one and rather meet them with respect and care, or even spark an interest and fascination for snakes on their own, kicking possible-future herpetologists who will grow up standing up for these animals: Then i did a good job, I think. That is my (little) contribution. Not all people have the ability of visiting the Snake Farm in Bangkok, let alone herping in the wild; and even more never get the chance of touching a snake at all (at least around here in Germany where I spent most of my time of the year when I’m not down in Trang, Thailand).

Being a visual artist, my snake also helps me greatly in terms of getting a deeper understanding in snake anatomy, behaviour and the like. There are things that photographic references could never convey as good as the actual living thing and thus, he helps me to study his very being from first hand, making him my most important „partner“, if you will, and bringing the best of serpent essence on paper – coming up with art that I regard so important to my work in terms of educating people about snakes, showing them that other side about them. The way they move, the way their skin and body is built; all these little things that sometimes must be touched or watched closely, studied for hundreds of hours to be fully understood (that might be a whimsical or eccentric little thing only artists can relate to, but perhaps you can see what I mean. Example: I never saw a snake drinking (and even though i also search and look for snakes whenever I’m in Thailand I hardly ever meet one calm or chill like that) before I watched my own doing so – and I found it almost absurdly fascinating. It just looked so fascinating!).

And I’m highly thankful for that, which means that I reward the help and reference he provides as good and as much as I can; making his well-being my number one priority. I take him out and let him roam in the actual outside under an actual sun every once in a while, I let him sniff in the grass and meet other beings, assure the natural food and do whatever else I
can to give him perhaps not a dangerous but an overall good life (with that said: He is by no means a wild snake but comes from a domesticated line – and that’s the one important thing that defines it all. But I’ll catch on that within a minute). Though I’m sure that I’m alone with that. Sadly so.

As for the argument of keeping snakes as a pair of balls/ego push, yes: To me there is NO doubt whatsoever that there are people out there who (most unfortunately) do keep snakes for this reason alone and I can fully understand and sign the disgust you have for this sentiment. There also is no doubt that there are plenty of people out there who only look for the rarest and most awesome looking colours or mutations with the most striking „paintjobs“ (never was a friend of that mutation craze, or even worse – breeding two different species just to see what comes out. How stupid and utterly unresponsible could you even get?), people who’d go and get a reticulated python for the „coolness-factor“ without realizing that these things are as suitable as pets as tigers when you get down to it; people who show off with their private collection of venomous snakes (and probably even think that Venomoids are all ethical). And I also won’t argue that there are even bigger dumbasses out there who keep their snakes in rather poor and pathetic conditions as you described in your article – because yes, there are.

As for myself – I never used my snake to gain any „awe“ or because I want to hear people saying „how metal I am“. I don’t even get the idea behind such a behaviour.

There are idiots out there and I’m sure it is quite a majority – and yet, I still feel that one has to differentiate a little.

With exotic „pets“, wild animals, may it be a harmless wild rabbit or a dangerous king cobra – I’m all on your side. Those should never be kept in private households. A reticulated python is a king cobra is a tiger is a shark is a hippo.
Something that should be reserved for zoos, research institutes, professionals and the like, species that should never be taken out of the wild for private purposes and carve out a miserable existence within a little apartment. Same goes for species like burmese pythons which might be rather calm in nature (exceptions prove the rule, mind you. I’ve seen your video of that super pissed burmese python – man, what a beast that one is!) but can be just as problematic due to their mere size.

With domesticated animals, though, you need to differ. Because yes – there actually are some snake species out there which can be seen as domesticated. Or more precisely: half-domesticated. Not like a cat or dog by all means, but comparable to a goldfish or hamster. Animals that have been bred and kept by humans for plenty of generations, that started to develop some differentiation in physiology and behaviour, acting „tame“ if handled and actually could have a hard time in the wild. Bred corn snakes are a prime example when it comes to domesticated snakes. And my snake happens to be such a corn snake. I would have never chose it over a wild one. Never. It also will be most likely the only kind snake that I ever keep since to me, keeping a domesticated snake is the only reasonable way to keep a snake overall – if you’re not a zoologist or professional researcher but a private person, that is.

As much as I am against keeping non-domesticated snakes as pets (which are the majority of most snake species out there, with the exception of said corn snake and some other species), I can’t say anything against keeping those half-domesticated ones.

Because if you say one shouldn’t keep a (domesticated) snake in a tank with a water dish, you’d could stretch this argument to so many other animals. Take hamsters, goldfish, siamese fighting fish, roosters – even rabbits or birds. Keeping parrots in a birdcage, no matter how big it is, would have to
be seen just as cruel. And it sure is cruel for actual wild animals. It’s a slight different thing with domesticated animals, who are used to human company, even adapted to it and never experienced the „real wild“ to begin with. I’d never catch a wild rabbit to keep it for the reasons above but there are domesticated rabbits. I’d never look for a wolf, why should I? We have dogs. And if I’m interested in keeping snakes, I stay far away from King Cobras. Because there are domesticated ones like corn snakes.

I’m sorry for the comment getting so long (it almost became quite the essay itself) but I hope I could at least give an interesting read. As said before, I highly enjoy the herp work you do (all the more since it is about Thailand’s snakes – because, well – it just feels home).

Take care and Chok Dee!