



Yondela Nqadala, this year's intern with Renu-Karoo/Wolwekraal Nature Reserve, writes exclusively for the Prince Albert Friend as part of her learning experience.

Snakes in the Karoo

Yondela Nqadala (Renu-Karoo)

Among some of the day-to-day challenges imposed by working in the nursery, snakes take the leading spot. We have seen many of them during the warm period of January to February. Some of us are terribly scared of snakes, but honestly they have not come to harm us, they are interested in food. A snake's diet is varied and consists mostly of small mammals, frogs, other reptiles, birds and eggs. They are also known to predate on other species of snakes.

Snakes are members of the vast reptile family and are perfectly adapted to physical movement without the use of any limbs. Most species spend most of their lives living on the ground, whilst others are happier in trees e.g. Boomslang. Like most reptiles, they are referred to as ectotherms (meaning that they use the surrounding environment to regulate their body temperature). The fear of snakes in general is referred to as ophidiophobia

and applies to most humans. Myths and legends add to the mystique of snakes being evil and devious e.g. the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Snakes are generally not interested in biting humans because we are too large. Since we are not seen as a source of food, a snake will do its best to avoid any confrontation. If provoked, any snake will respond by either trying to escape or, if venomous, bite as a last resort. This action is purely defensive since venom is precious and is best kept for the purpose of hunting. Snake handlers and those foolish enough to attempt to harm or kill a snake are the most common victims of snakebite. Snakes need not be feared but rather respected for the role they play in the natural world around us; keeping pests like rats at a minimum.

Our local snake rescuer, Mr. Atholl Lopnow, agrees that garden rubbish and

other forms of waste attracts pests such as rats and mice. Even the gardens which we cultivate become a habitat of frogs, small reptiles, birds and a host of invertebrates. All of these creatures make up a large part of a snake's diet and so they will be present from time to time. It is wise to regularly dispose of garden refuse and avoid any buildup of other forms of rubbish within a property. Snake confrontations are avoidable and while snake repellants are commercially available, reports suggest they are ineffective.

Remember, many snakes are either rare or extinct in the wild. This is due to the fast changing nature of their environment caused by global warming. These changes have been so rapid that snakes have not developed adapting responses, so they perish. According to a law recently passed by the Western Cape High Court, it is now illegal to kill a snake in the Western Cape Province. ■



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