

REPTILE HOUSE 'SERPO'

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INTRODUCTION

In an earlier edition of *Litteratura Serpentina* we paid attention to the travelling snake exhibition of Walter Getreuer - in honour of its tenth anniversary - which, under the name of 'SERPO', travels throughout The Netherlands (Van der Voort, 1993). In that article we announced that a permanent reptile exhibition would open in April 1993 in Delft under the name of REPTILE HOUSE 'SERPO'. Although this has been advertised in *Litteratura Serpentina* from 1993 onwards, the reptile house in Delft finally opened to the public just before the summer of 1994, and this was reason enough for the editors of this journal to go and take a look at the Stationsplein in Delft where the reptile house is housed.

TEETHING TROUBLES

It was a somewhat drizzly day in August as we arrived in Delft. The whole of the town center was disrupted, due to the construction of a tramway as Walter informs us later, so it was a bit difficult to reach the Stationsplein by car. Once there, large billboards in striking colours - well known of the travelling SERPO exhibition - guide us along the canal wharf. The reptile house is housed in a former warehouse, discretely situated but having ample parking spaces, an important luxury in an old city like Delft.

Having arrived and once inside the building some large enclosures housing some beautiful alligators immediately attract our attention, as well as the well known standard SERPO terraria. With the help of an enormous amount of tropical plants a quiet, pleasant atmosphere is created, inviting you to view the animals on display at leisure.

One of the first questions put to Walter was, of course, why it took so long before the permanent exhibition finally opened its doors. He assured us that it was certainly not his doing. Just as when he began his travelling exhibition, this venture proved again that budding entrepreneurs face a countless number of bureaucratic hurdles. To begin with, the financing of this project proved to be even more difficult than the travelling exhibition. Nowadays, banks demand so many guarantees that you virtually have to prove that you do not really need the money before they are prepared to give you a loan! Fortunately, 'SERPO' has in the meantime earned itself such a good reputation with several suppliers of materials - such as those needed for building new terraria - that all of the necessary co-operation was given from all quarters.

Getting co-operation from the city of Delft was somewhat more troublesome. On one hand they are very busy reviving the tourist value of their city, in view of which some municipal institutions as the Army Museum are getting support in all kinds of ways (you only have to think about signposts and inclusion in the City guide), but on the other hand private initiative is hardly supported. Walter himself is the first to admit that his reptile house is in a grey area somewhere between a commercial business and a tourist-come-cultural institution. His request from a subsidy from a fund to promote tourism was at first denied, saying that such a fund did not exist. At a later request to the city for signposts he was told that 'if he was to present himself as a commercial venture, he most certainly would not get those cultural subsidies!' Only after calling in the Chamber of Commerce was it possible to get a subsidy from the tourist fund in the end. The co-operation of the city was not very good either with regards to the renovation of the building in which 'SERPO' is now housed. One week before the exhibition was due to open to the public a 'building freeze' was declared because the required building permits were lacking! In the end, this matter was also settled, but all in all the opening of the reptile house was delayed considerably.

THE REPTILE HOUSE

The exhibition itself reminds one of the travelling snake exhibition with its spaciouly placed terraria (made by Walter himself from his own design) in which the animals can be viewed well. At the moment the emphasis of the animals on display is still on snakes, and there



Foto 1: Interieur van Reptielenhuis Serpo.
Interior of Reptilehouse Serpo.

are only a few crocodilians, spiders and turtles which can be admired in addition to the 100 or so snakes, but Walter hopes to expand on the number of other reptiles in the near future.

One question Walter and his staff often hear is 'whether those animals ever produce faeces, because we do not see anything!' They regard this as a compliment and proof that they are managing things in the right way. The first task each morning is to check the livestock, or in Walter's own words 'see if everybody is still there in good health'. Faeces are indeed cleared away every day, water bowls are cleaned when they are soiled and not forgetting to clean the windows, which is something else that has to be done every day. When it is especially busy these are the jobs they can hardly attend to during the day and attention also has to be paid to safety. It has sometimes happened that when Walter had opened a cage at a quiet moment to remove a poisonous snake, he is suddenly surrounded by visitors and they even dare to tug his arm because 'they cannot see it properly'. Although the public are very inquisitive they do not realise that snakes, and especially venomous species, can be very dangerous. The faeces of a Mamba for example are therefore cleared away in the evening after the visitors have gone. Only then can the necessary proceedings be carried out in peace and quiet.

According to Walter, calm is a magic word when dealing with venomous snakes. 'Never clean your animals when you have to catch a train in five minutes, that is asking for trouble'. Take your time and if you notice that the animal does not want to be disturbed, just wait another day. There is no need to give a snake a clean water bowl promptly, you must never endanger your own health for that. Of course, you must not let everything get so dirty that the animals' health suffers, but peace and quiet have to come first in the care of (venomous) snakes.

Besides Walter and his wife, some other people are active within 'SERPO'. As the only permanent staff-member, Gert-Jan Reef is much involved with the travelling exhibition, which according to Walter still exists and will certainly remain. Jeroen, Gert-Jan's brother, always helps with the formation and dismantling of the exhibition, and there are others who also regularly come and lend a hand. Necessary help, for Walter does not have as much time to take care of his animals as he would like. Lots of time is spent in his tireless efforts to dispense with the bad publicity snakes in general receive in the public's eyes. A few of his snakes are registered with a model agency and last October (1994) he delivered and took care of the Diamondback rattlesnakes which were used to guard precious diamonds in a shop window of the Amsterdam Bijenkorf. But the welfare of the animals always comes first with him. Giving his co-operation to an advertisement campaign for snake skin products was obviously refused, as were requests for snakes which Walter received as a result of a television broadcast of the VPRO, in which a woman had sex with a snake. Whether or not tactfully, these requests were very resolutely refused.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

An important part of Walter's activities are nevertheless not commercial. For instance, he provides teaching materials for use in schools. With the help of the contents of these teaching kits, the world of reptiles can be made real. A world that would otherwise remain so abstract. A piece of discarded skin, a small skull or the rattle from a rattlesnake. Together with a video these things are especially meant to inform young people about nature and reptiles and amphibians in particular.

Especially, this information to the public plays an important role in general. The well known 'test your knowledge' computers are also present in Delft and a score of ten correct

answers is rewarded with a sticker. A task which is not too difficult when you read the information which is so accurately displayed on each terrarium. According to Walter it is more remarkable that the ones who win such a sticker are nearly always non-snake keepers, proof perhaps that people are genuinely interested in the information that is presented, even more so than the so-called real snake lovers.

Besides the aforementioned teaching kits he also takes care of terraria for institutions such as schools, or even an institute for the mentally handicapped. The animals are provided on loan along with the necessary information.

Within the permanent exhibition in Delft, room for educational activities has been created on the first floor. There is a small museum with lots of background information about reptiles and a video room will be ready shortly. 'SERPO' is also a favourite destination for school outings, for Walter regards young people in particular as a grateful target group which always reacts inquisitively and show interest.

Within this information the plan for a European department fits in. Here, Walter wants to bring together European animals so that the holiday-maker is able to see what he has encountered. A need which is certainly felt considering the fact that there are people on his doorstep every week with a snapshot or a discarded skin asking 'Can you tell me what this is?'

But Walter has not only an educational duty to the public in general, he also attends to the practical and theoretical training of inspectors of the AID, the general inspection department. This department is responsible for such things as the inspection of animal shipments, which also includes shipments of venomous snakes, and this is something that must be done safely. In connection with this Walter has developed material which can be used in such cases.

In the past, animals that had been confiscated ended up with Walter due to his contacts with the AID, and this shelter function of 'SERPO' becomes increasingly more important. Nevertheless, at the moment the policy of the AID with regard to animal shelter is being restructured and animals, as well as plants, will only be placed with institutions that are officially recognised by the government. Right now, the procedure of an official request is still under consideration for 'SERPO'. Locally, 'SERPO' already clearly fulfills a shelter function. Through the animal ambulance and the RSPCA, animals are regularly brought in. Sometimes the cases are distressing, like a lizard confiscated from a property which had all of its toes gnawed at by crickets. These animals cannot be replaced very easily.

THE FUTURE

It is clearly obvious that Walter has started this venture of a permanent exhibition particularly out of a passion and brimming with idealism. He has already been around for quite some time in the exhibition scene and realises very well that 'from a strictly commercial view, it is easier to start an outdoor exhibition on the Canary Islands'. Fortunately, he gets a lot of support from colleagues and acquaintances in his drive to realise his many dreams for the future. The fact that he also seeks the purely commercial path out of sheer necessity is something that no-one will blame him for.

LITERATURE

Voort, M. VAN DER, 1993. Ten years of Serpo. *Litteratura Serpentium* 13 (2): 66-70.