

EDUCATION ABOUT MY SNAKES IN SCHOOLS

**Erna Joseph, Hondsrug 118
8251 VW Dronten.
Tel.: +31 321-315993.
E-mail: jedmjoseph@solcon.nl**

About six years ago I bought my first two snakes, after my nose was for many years pressed against the window of the local pet shop. Sometimes they had a few snakes, and when I look back now, they were not always in the best condition. After I read something about snakes, I decided to make the big step, and I bought a couple water snakes from China (*Natrix stolata*). I also got a breeder's report. I had the impression they were born in captivity. After a while I discovered that they were caught in the wild. Soon the problems started. They were ill, they didn't want to eat, and they were loaded with mites. This was a 'wonderful' start of my hobby. A "connoisseur" told me it was a red ratsnake (*Elaphe guttata guttata*), so I offered them the wrong food. Fortunately the same day I could recognise the "connoisseur", and I didn't force-feed them with mice, as he wanted me to do. Because I read one meter of books in a very short time, I discovered very soon that all of his advice was very bad. Unfortunately both of the snakes were dead within three weeks. Also snake number three, which I got from the pet shop as compensation, didn't survive either. This was almost the end of my hobby. Fortunately, I tried once more with a healthy and eating common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*). The purchase of this snake was the end of a black period, and the start of my hobby.

As with most people keeping snakes, one snake was not enough. Now I have many terraria in a room which is much too small. I have twenty adult animals, and some offspring. The limited space, and more important the lack of time, are the reasons it



will stay like this against my will. Like other snake keepers, I enjoy breeding with my snakes, but besides that my hobby has a very different angle. As a mother of two sons I always had a lot of children in the house. The children were always interested in my snakes. A few years ago a school teacher asked me to come to school and tell the children something about my hobby. Now I often visit schools in my town and in the neighbourhood. The children are from 9 to about 12 years old. Every time it is a big success. I always take four of my snakes. First I tell them a lot about my pets. I could talk for days, but I will stop sooner. After that, children start asking many questions. They always want to know where the dirt shows up, because that's something they don't understand. Once a boy in the age of 9 wanted to know the name of the snake with the pair of maracas in his tail. They always show interest in the poisonous snakes. They know I haven't got them, but there are always a lot of questions about them. I always show them a drawing of the different teeth



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of snakes. Maybe there is somebody out there who has a tooth for me to show in the schools?

Finally, the moment they all are waiting for. The class is noisy as my first snake appears. They show fear and admiration. I start with a juvenile red ratsnake (*Elaphe guttata guttata*). First they back up, they know all the frightening stories from the newspapers. They change the moment I walk by. It's a baby, they show emotion, and this can't be really that dangerous. After the first "hero" touches the snake, the other ones start counting the fingers of the hero. It seems as though there isn't one missing. Reluctantly the group will follow. The second snake, often my sandboa from Kenya (*Eryx colubrinus loveridgei*), a common trinket snake (*Elaphe helena*) or a Mexican milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum annulata*) is less frightening. After this I take my loyal common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*) or the plains garter snake (*Thamnophis radix*), according to a twelve year old girl, a sesame snake. At the end there is big adult red ratsnake (*Elaphe guttata guttata*). They are not afraid anymore. The children can hold the snake and, if they want to, they can wrap him around their neck. Every time this is their big wish. The love for snakes is born, they totally fall in love with them. They don't stop asking questions. Tonight they will ask their parents to buy a snake for them, but not one of the children has succeeded so far. The really serious lovers (there are lots of them) come to my house to see my collection. I think some little zoos would like my number of visitors. I know with certainty that the children of these schools will grow up with admiration for snakes, and they will not believe all the bad stories about them. They know that these snakes are domesticated and when they meet snakes in nature, they should enjoy them at a safe distance. Only once a mad mother came to me right before I started. She wanted to know why I wanted to scare all the children, and give them

nightmares. I am sure that her son or daughter told her a very different story the moment he or she came home.

I enjoy this enlightenment very much, and it's my goal to change the negative thinking about snakes, and keep them at home, so we can continue our hobby. In future nobody has to explain anything to these children anymore.

Translation: Erna Joseph

Corrections: Chris Mattison

