Bull. Chicago Herp. Soc. 36(4):78-80, 2001

Recollections of Another Young Herpetologist

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Having read Robert Sprackland's article "To the Parents of a Young Herpetologist" [Bull. Chicago Herp. Soc. 36(2):29-30, 2001], I thought I'd recall a few of my own childhood herping experiences for other CHS members.

I was born in the UK, but came out to Australia at the ripe old age of five. I grew up in Sydney which in itself probably sealed my fate as a lifelong herper. You see the reptiles are so prolific there that you just can't miss them.

My induction as a herpetologist commenced at age five when pottering about the garden of our Lane Cove home. I found a three-foot bluetongue skink (*Tiliqua scincoides*) in a flower bed. My mum shrieked with fear as I grabbed it by its tail and flung the lizard into a cardboard box that was to become its short-term home. I'd seen the lizards on TV and for me this large skink was as much as status symbol as a pet. Three-foot? Now I hear a few readers already doubting my story. But may I assure you that I am telling the truth. You see the lizard had only three legs. One of the hind ones was missing. That's why the lizard had just sat there hissing when I found it. Basically it couldn't run away.

My next reptiles were a pair of long-necked tortoises I found in a creek a few hundred meters from our house. I fished them out and built an outdoor pen for them. They thrived and over the years I built up an impressive collection consisting of about 7 species—all caught in creeks around Sydney. Most weren't native to Sydney, so were obviously escapees from other people's collections or similar. At the time most pet shops sold these reptiles.

A few years later I was expelled from the Lane Cove Public School. The reason: Bringing my pets to school. You see, back then in the late 1960s and early 1970s reptiles were regarded as "creepy" and the official attitude towards them was that people should have nothing to do with them. My parents even took me to a psychologist to see if I was "normal." After all, wanting to keep reptiles as pets was anything but normal. After shelling out a small fortune, the psychologist told my mum, "He'll grow out of it—it's just a passing fad."

Thirty years later, the fad hasn't passed.

My next primary school (Greenwich) had a more benevolent attitude towards me and my pets. In fact they even asked me to do lectures on them for the other kids. I recall one time that I stood there taking snakes and lizards out of bags and trying to tell the kids what was what. It was one of those humid hot summer's days in Sydney when most school kids are more content with sleeping at their desks rather than learning about anything. However, the class suddenly perked up when a carpet snake started writhing and then sprayed all its urine all over the kids sitting at the front of the class. Six months later when I did my next lecture to the class, no one wanted to sit at the front.

The highlight this time was a Krefft's Tortoise (*Emydura krefftí*) that piddled all over the floor of the class. Another time I was called in to give a talk to a kindergarten. Pandemonium struck when a previously docile nine-foot carpet snake decided to take out a toddler by striking at his head and then trying to coil around his body. No harm ensued, but it was a stark reminder to have supervision when handling "harmless" pythons with small kids.

For Rob Sprackland in America, his interest in herps came though herp books. For me it was the opposite. The books came after the live animals. When I was a youth, the only definitive book available here was Worrell's *Reptiles of Australia*. It took what seemed to be a lifetime for me to save up the $12 I needed to buy my very own copy of the book. But it didn't take me anywhere near as long to memorize the book's entire contents. Twenty years later, the book has long since been superseded by the likes of Cogger's definitive book (several editions) and others, and most people who have entered the field of herpetology since the mid 1970s would probably have no concept of how significant Worrell's book was to herpetology here in Australia at the time.

By the time I was at high school in my pre-teens, my hobby as a herpetologist was immutable. I'd already amassed a sizeable collection of snakes, lizards and tortoises and spent every waking hour working out how to get even more. In those days you didn't need permits to catch and keep these animals and so for an Aussie herper, life was in that respect much easier.

In my first year at North Sydney Boys High School I came a cropper with some classmates after they found out that I was getting rats and mice from the school labs to feed to my snakes. I was branded "Rat-killer" and taunted wherever I went.

A year later things had changed. Those same kids who were teasing me a year earlier were now addicted. They too were hooked into keeping reptiles as pets. In fact many were effectively employed by me to capture feed skinks for my ever-growing collection of small elapids. Those snakes don't eat mice and so the only food source for them was the smaller lizards (referred to here as "feed skinks"). They are found in almost every house and garden in Australia, but when you start taxing your own yard for these lizards, it doesn't take long to effectively exterminate them within a decent radius of where you live. With each snake eating an average of three per week

and me having thirty odd at any time, I needed about ninety feed skinks a week just to keep my collection going. It wasn't feasible for me to go looking for these lizards so instead I started doing contra-deals for these lizards. Using my legendary lizard finding dog, I'd travel far and wide on weekends in search of Cunningham's skinks (*Egernia cunninghami*) (at Oberon), blotched bluetongues (*Tiliqua nigrolutea*) (at Katoomba), land mullets (*Egernia major*) (At Niagra Park), water dragons (*Physignathus lesueurii*) (at Epping or Oxford Falls), Gippsland water dragons (*P. howitti*) (at Jamberoo), etc. I'd haul them to school and swap them for anywhere between 30 and 100 feed skinks per lizard and this was more than enough to keep my own collection afloat.

Every morning I'd come to school and meet the other kids who'd give me an average of two or three skinks each that they'd found in their yards or nearby the previous afternoon. The calico bank bags we put the lizards in were scored for free from the local banks. I started a school herpetology club and for a while it was the most popular club in the place. Lunchtime meetings would attract up to 100 students. However by the later years of high school things took a downward turn. Herpetologically anyway. There were several reasons for this. For many kids the novelty of keeping lizards and snakes wore off. They looked elsewhere for their entertainment. Many took to drugs. The big thing then was Mandrax (Mandies), as tablets, and later marijuana. Heroin and cocaine only moved into Sydney in a big way in the 1980s.

Then came the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). They spelled the death knell to a booming interest in herpetology, not just among my fellow students, but also to students across my home state of New South Wales (NSW).

In 1974, the NPWS introduced a system whereby you needed a license to so much as look at a reptile in the bush and/or keep them. Because I had an interest in these creatures before then, I got a license at the relevant time and so, for a while was basically immune from any law-enforcement activity by the department. However for those who developed an interest in these creatures after June 1974, it was effectively impossible to get a license to keep them and thus most budding herpetologists were effectively dissuaded from pursuing their interest.

Those who ran the gauntlet and kept without a permit were invariably raided and lost all the herps they had. And yes, they'd soon be forcibly run out of the hobby by the NPWS. By the mid 1970s it became clear that not all who worked with the NPWS were kosher and that some officers were improperly raiding illegally and even legally held collections, seizing reptiles and then sending them overseas.

The details of these scams are in the *Smuggled* books (Hoser, 1993, 1996) so I won't repeat them here. However I will recall another couple of cases that are vaguely relevant to this account of my youth.

General knowledge of my "expertise" in reptiles had spread far and wide. What did this "expertise" actually consist of? In the eyes of everyone else it was merely an ability to find, identify and capture a snake or lizard if asked to. Soon I had people in the neighborhood ringing me to remove an unwanted snake or lizard from their suburban back yard. I willingly obliged. After all, it sure beat spending days walking through the bush trying to find the same things. Soon I had the local NSW Police onto the same caper. People would call them wanting a snake removed from their house or garden and the police would then call me to do the job. As I was too young to have a driving license, it would be common for them to front up to my home and pick me up, before driving me in a police car to the house to pick up the snake. Nobody seemed to mind this arrangement. But there was another constant that soon became apparent.

The calls to remove snakes and lizards would always be when I wasn't home. Why? I think it had something to do with Murphy's law. At first my parents would tell the callers "He's out, can't help you." But I'd come home and want to kill my parents for not going to get the reptile themselves.

Like the time my Dad told me "Ray, about three hours ago, we got a call from a woman in Turramurra who had a big black and yellow snake in a tree in her yard, and I told her you were out." Yes, I'd just missed out on a diamond python (*Morelia spilota*), which back then was a highly sought snake. We'd have a household war for the next week! I then gave my parents a crash-course on snake identification and handling and made it clear that in the unlikely event that I wasn't home and a call came through, that they were to go get the reptiles.

They didn't like the idea, but they put up with it as it was probably better than another week of family dispute. Like the time a call came through for a lizard. As usual I wasn't home so my dad went off to get it. It turned out to be a six-foot male lace monitor (*Varanus varius*) in a tree in suburban Turramurra. In front of about a hundred people my dad climbed up a pine tree and grabbed the lizard. In turn the lizard slashed my dad's face with his tail and ripped his arms to shreds with his claws. Did I care? No. The main thing was that he got it home in one piece, so I was happy.

The snake-rescue activity came to a fairly abrupt end in the late 1970s after I got a call for a diamond python near where I lived in St. Ives. As usual I wasn't home, so my dad went and got it. It was beautiful eight and a half foot thing. As per my license requirements my dad had then called the NPWS to tell them of the new snake. I arrived home a few hours later to see my dad handing the snake over to a representative of the department. When I asked why we had to hand the snake over, I was told by the official not to argue. The official told me that they needed the snake "for research." It all sounded a bit suss to me, but I went along with the caper to save the peace.

When I recalled the incident to Ewe Peters, the herpetologist at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, he told me what he thought. That was that the snake was to be sent overseas illegally by the NPWS people. How did he know? He was one of the main ones doing it. Peters himself was in on the caper. He told me he was sending hundreds of herps out for the NPWS people. A few months later we had a near rerun of the previous in-

cident. I was out releasing some surplus Cunningham's skinks (I bred them every year), when my dad got a phone call from a Mrs. Molinari of Terry Hills. My dad raced over to her house and plucked a seven-foot diamond python out of a lemon tree. This time he waited for me to come home to contact NPWS to tell them of the new snake. The next day Tony Alexander from NPWS fronted up and demanded that I hand over the snake. I refused. He threatened to have me charged with every offense known. In turn I threatened to go to the media with all that I knew about NPWS's improper activities. Alexander didn't get the snake, not then anyway, but the NPWS people later broke in and stole it.

However, the incident made one fact completely apparent. That was that the NPWS people were now (in the late 1970s) using "snake catchers" like myself as an easy and effective source of reptiles to supply their overseas contacts. I wasn't going to be a party to this and so immediately made it known that I wouldn't rescue any more snakes from anywhere. A few weeks later we got yet another call from the local Pymble Police Station. The policeman said, "We're in a house here and there's a six-foot brown snake. Can you come and get it?"

I said "No."

I explained why I was no longer collecting snakes from houses. The policeman then shouted away from the phone to his off-sider, "He's not coming. Shoot it!"

I heard a loud bang.

And that just about summed up the official attitude to snakes and lizards in Australia. "The only good reptile is a dead one—that is unless you can make a buck out of it."

Literature Cited

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