

Letter to the editor

I refer to the excellent editorial by Alan Wilkie in the September issue of *Herptile*.

The editorial talks about the potential demise of herpetoculture in the UK, due to the pressures of "Animal Rights" groups and others. Wilkie talks about the need to unite with other herpetological societies and the like to protect herpetoculture and the very species being kept by them.

Wilkie is correct.

Some years back I warned of these same threats in this same journal and yes, my dire predictions are coming true. The threats to herpetoculture as we know it are real and increasing. These manifest themselves in a growing legal framework in which we operate and the increasing ease at which well-meaning herpetologists can find themselves outside of the law. I write from Australia, so expect most readers to have a better idea of the immediate situation in the UK than I do.

In Australia it took two decades and the publication of two books (*Smuggled* (in 1993) and *Smuggled-2* (in 1996)) to finally force a substantial roll-back of one of the most restrictive legislative regimes for keepers in the world. Here in Australia most of us now regard ourselves as fortunate to have more benign laws that allow most of us to keep the reptiles of our choice. However our battles are far from over.

In Western Australia, the private keeping of reptiles is effectively outlawed, although we hope this will change shortly. Things are marginally better in the Northern Territory, while Queensland is at present the only state that seems to be seriously trying to make things more difficult for private keepers. There some bureaucrats are pushing hard to remove all venomous snakes from private keepers.

However the relatively benign conditions in the other states (SA, Vic, NSW, ACT and Tas) appear to be, only because of the work of a small number of individuals on behalf of the keepers and a pitifully small number of enlightened bureaucrats. Should a bureaucrat with a different mindset take over the running of a wildlife department in any of these states, things could dramatically change for the worse overnight – (just as they did in NSW in 1973-4).

Many herpetologists in Australia are mindful of this, which perhaps explains why the *Smuggled* books remain in high demand and *Smuggled* (1) had to be reprinted recently.

In the United States of America they too have had their problems with so-called "Animal Rights" people pushing the bureaucrats to tighten up the laws relating to the keeping of reptiles. In Florida the local herpetological societies formed a powerful alliance and with a crack-legal team have managed to maintain a reasonably good legal framework for the local herpetoculturists. However Kurt Harbsmier of the Central Florida Herpetological Society (CFHS) told me that "We are always under siege, so we must remain vigilant". Wayne Hill of the CFHS said much the same thing.

Elsewhere in the USA, things have not been as good with local keeping laws ranging from good to mediocre and then totally draconian. In response to the push to tighten up the keeping laws, the NRAAC was formed. Run by Jeff Barringer (of "kingsnake.com" fame) and others, the NRAAC has been an effective body in slowing (but not stopping) the push to eliminate the rights of people to keep reptiles.

The UK needs a counterpart to the NRAAC. Not just in the future, but NOW.

However it's not just herpetoculturists rights under siege here. As Wilkie said in his editorial, some species actually depend on our maintaining the right to keep reptiles in captivity. Major zoos (public and private) cannot possibly maintain viable numbers of all the species presently under threat. The private keepers are needed to help fill this role. There is no doubt that one of the greatest mass-extinction's in history is underway. It would get tedious for me to give too many examples of species under threat or potential threat, but I'll just name two.

One is the Papuan Black Snake (*Pseudechis papuanas*). This species, known only from politically unstable Southern New Guinea and adjacent areas appears to die out following the introduction of Cane Toads (*Bufo marinus*). This invasive toad species, originally introduced by humans (and native to South America) is toxic to snakes that eat it and appears to be increasing its distribution across the range of the Papuan Black Snake. It is a very real possibility that the toads may cause the extermination of Papuan Blacks in the wild state.

Another little-known species from New Guinea of the genus *Pailsus* was only described this year (2000). It is presently known only from the Merauke area and adjacent parts of Irian Jaya. It too may be under threat from the Cane Toads, which I understand have yet to invade the areas this snake occurs in. The snake is a thin ugly brown thing, that is dangerously venomous, loves to bite it's handlers and grows to about a metre. In other words, it is hardly the sort of thing zoos and other similar institutions are going to want to fill up their exhibit cages with.

Private keepers (if allowed to keep them) may eventually hold the only surviving members of this species. I may be wrong. The species may in fact survive the invasion of Cane Toads when (not if) they move into their range.

But should we take that risk?

Then there's the frogs. Who'd have predicted the extermination of dozens of species across the world within a few short years due to the (then unknown) Chytrid fungus? Should we risk the fate of yet more species by having captive colonies outlawed? Finally in relation to the threats to herpetoculture, one mustn't overlook the threats from within.

Those who seek to destroy the 'hobby' as we know it, may in fact come from our own ranks. Using the 'divide and conquer' methodology, our adversaries may recruit the weaker or more corrupt to actually work against the common good.

For years, in NSW (Australia), the NPWS used a few so-called herpetologists as agents for them and/or informants in return for unusually favorable treatment when issuing of otherwise unavailable keepers licences, immunity from prosecution and the like.

It was only by using these so-called 'herpetologists' that the NPWS was able to maintain an effective black-out of private herpetology in NSW for over 20 years. I could rattle off the names, but I'll spare you the details (refer to *Smuggled* and *Smuggled-2*).

These people also go out of their way to vilify and smear the herpetologists who try to fight for the right to keep fauna in captivity. Invariably they use smoke and mirrors to try to get their mud to stick, but eventually some does.

However I understand that already a similar situation exists in the UK, where one or more so-called herpetologists (whom I again won't name here) are actively pushing for an end to all private keeping of reptiles. These people are an integral part of the threat herpetology faces and must be openly identified and shown up for what they are – frauds. Failure to do so may result in things getting worse for UK herpetoculturists far quicker than many of us would like to think.

How bad?

For the animals – some may soon become extinct.

For the people – you – well you guess.

But if I can offer any guidance or what I'd like to call an educated guess: Think how bad things could become and then multiply it ten-fold.

What does this mean? Get cracking!

Raymond Hoser, Melbourne, Australia, October 2000.
<http://www.raymondhoser.com>

OBITUARY Tuesday 5th December 2000

It was with a feeling of shock and disbelief that I received the sad news this morning of the death of Andy Devare. I had only spoken to Andy late last week regarding his article.

The news was relayed to me by fellow committee member Alan Toon, who was a close friend of Andy's. Alan evidently telephoned on Tuesday evening and was astounded when the Police answered the 'phone.

Andy was a great character and although not 'in the thick of things' will be missed by those who knew him.

As a remembrance of Andy I will attempt to obtain the second part of his *Corucia* article. I am sure he would have wished me to finish it for him.

Alan H. Wilkie (Editor)