

Snakes and illegal drugs.

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Introduction;

A problem that has occasionally been reported in the media is the use of venomous snakes to protect illegal drugs. It is a well known fact that many drug smugglers also smuggle snakes and other wildlife, although the connection between the two at the "dealer" level isn't known.

In spite of some notable "busts" and seizures, reptile dealers don't appear to be involved in the dealing of illicit drugs on any major scale in any of the western (developed) nations.

On June 29th, 1993, Drug Enforcement Agents at Miami airport found 36 kilos of cocaine wrapped in condoms and stuffed into Boa constrictors, *Boa constrictor*. The snakes, imported from South America, were still alive when found and consisted of 312 animals averaging about 1.5 metres in length. The cocaine was only found by accident when one of the snakes was seen to have an unnatural bulge. Officials X-rayed it to see what was inside and removed two condom-wrapped pellets, each containing four ounces of cocaine. Despite observation the officials were unable to apprehend anyone in relation to the case. They were also unable to find the importer and no arrests or charges were laid. It was the largest discovery of drugs in snakes ever.

Smith and Chiszar (1990) cite a case where serpents and drugs seemed to be connected.

In that the case the authors were called in by the Denver Department of Environmental Health (USA) to remove and identify two snakes that had been confiscated by police in a raid on a "Crack House". The snakes were a Western Diamondback rattlesnake, *Crotalus atrox*, and an Asian pitviper, *Trimeresurus* sp.. Smith and Chiszar suspected that the two snakes were temporary guards of drug packages placed in their cages.

About a decade earlier a similar incident involving a mixture of non-venomous and venomous snakes was reported in Canada.

Here I report on Australian drug/reptile related cases;

Case 1;

In the early 1980's a well-known Sydney snake keeper lived in Baulkham Hills and kept a large number of elapids. (Without naming him he once stole two Green pythons, *Chondropython viridis*, from Taronga Zoo and was later caught, appeared in Parramatta Court charged with the offence, all of which was widely reported on in the Sydney media). This man and a number of his friends, who also kept venomous reptiles, were also large scale consumers (and small time dealers) of marijuana and other illicit drugs. Some of the drugs used were definitely of the "hard" variety.

This group used to smoke marijuana in the same room as the snakes and would store unsmoked quantities in the snake cages with a view that if the police raided the place they wouldn't dare look in the cages for drugs.

Some of the snakes in that room were photographed by me and these photos appeared in my book "Australian Reptiles and Frogs" (Hoser, 1989), and whilst I took the photos a group of people were smoking "dope" non-stop.

I should stress that this person lived some distance from my home and that I only visited his facility on roughly three occasions solely to take photos and had no further interest in him or his reptiles. The man, in his late teens or early twenties, was of a friendly nature and his reptiles were in excellent health. However, he also appeared to be almost permanently "drugged out". His drug problem worsened significantly in the period 1981 - 86.

Case 2;

In 1978 a herpetologist from Kilpa Place, St. Ives, N.S.W., told me a story of a friend of his who grew large quantities of marijuana in an indoor cage/enclosure. The friend also had a number of large, aggressive Eastern Brown snakes, *Pseudonaja textilis*, in the same cage. The presence of the snakes was supposedly to deter raiding police officers from entering his reptile cages and seizing his drugs. This deterrent apparently worked and the man was never "busted".

However, the fact that this story is sourced from this particular herpetologist is good reason to cast doubt on its authenticity. He has a reputation amongst other herpetologists for exaggeration and "story-telling". He is a very knowledgeable reptile man, but when dealing with him I have always had difficulty in separating fact from fiction.

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Case 3;

Another very interesting case occurred in 1981. Mid-year, a family from Falconbridge (N.S.W.) were raided by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) officials, led by Tony Alexander of NPWS, and unlicensed snakes were removed from the family's premises. Only their young daughter was present in the house when the raid took place. It was noticed that before the car (a station wagon) was loaded up with a number of small snakes in bags, that a large number of bagged reptiles were already present in the vehicle. These were presumably from an earlier raid. Also seen in the rear of the station wagon were a few potted marijuana plants, presumably taken at the same time as the previous raid and from the same place.

In theory NPWS officials have no jurisdiction over drugs and similar items, so it was odd that the marijuana plants were in their car and not in a police car. It is presumed that the plants were taken illegally in the raid. Peter Marzol of the Customs Dept. was also involved in this raid, but his jurisdiction didn't cover the seizure of domestically grown marijuana either.

This family (all of whom are involved with reptiles) is a very reliable source of information.

An interesting feature of their raid was the fact that a Spotted python, *Bothrochilus maculosus*, taken on during that raid was later passed to me by the NPWS officials on July 31st of that year (totally illegally). I gave the snake back to NPWS immediately, and this case is documented in my aforementioned book on page 204.

A second interesting point is that most, if not all of those who partook in the raid case I've just mentioned have been found to be corrupt and have since been removed from their positions. For example, amongst other things, Peter Marzol was committed to stand trial for perjury in a case where he deliberately gave false evidence in relation to the murder inquest of a drug-addicted prostitute (Whitton, 1986).

Case 4;

A newspaper article by journalist Paul Robinson (cited below) indicated a strong connection between drug and reptile traffickers. Victorian wildlife officer Tony Boardman was quoted as stating that he believed that up to 80% of his department's reptile-related arrests were linked to drugs. He told 'The Age' - "I've been to some houses where drugs have been kept and they have used snakes as mantraps. In one specific case a person had a vivarium that measured about 1.2 by 2 metres. There were a number of venomous snakes in it. The cage was lined with sand and gravel. On the bottom it was lined with Buddha Sticks (drugs).".

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Boardman was also quoted as saying "*There are people tied up with drug couriers. It's like truckies; they don't like to go home empty-handed. You come in with the drugs and you leave with the birds. It's called backloading.*".

A senior wildlife officer from South Australia asserted that there was a big smuggling trade to and from Australia that was linked to organised crime in the country. The extent of the trade was "a scandal".

Summary;

The use and abuse of snakes by drug dealers can and does occur. Certainly, circumstantial evidence points to this happening in Australia and the United States, particularly in the light of the fourth case or cases, as well as further cases reported in Hoser (1993). The general fear of snakes within much of the community makes snakes an excellent means of guarding illicit drugs.

It must be noted however that many reptile keepers may also be drug users or dealers, and their two interests may not always conflict or be connected as implied in all of the cases that receive popular media attention.

References;

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Editor's note;

Drug squad officers at Rome airport, Italy, were waiting for two "heavily pregnant" Old English sheepdogs and their "owner". The dogs were carrying 41bs of pure Colombian cocaine worth £200,000. A total of 16 people have been arrested in connection with the smuggling attempt, and both dogs are recovering from operations to remove the drugs.

(Daily Mail, 25/11/94)