SNAKES SWALLOWING THEIR OWN TEETH

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Although it is known that teeth are replaced in snakes, (Hoser, 1989) neither the rate at which this occurs or what happens to the replaced teeth appears to have been documented. Casual observations by the authors indicates a high rate of tooth loss in snakes, particularly non-venomous varieties and that large numbers of teeth are ingested by snakes when feeding.

In his work at Taronga Zoo (Sydney) one of the authors (C.W.) had the opportunity to inspect the faeces of a number of snakes. Each faeces was carefully checked for discarded teeth. Five samples from Reticulated Pythons *Python reticulatus* averaged ten undigested teeth, with the maximum number of teeth found in a single faeces being about twenty. A similar number of teeth were found in three faeces of Scrub Pythons *Morelia amethistina.* Faeces from *Taipan Oxyuranus scutellatus* and Death Adder *Acanthophis antarcticus* which were inspected contained few if any teeth. Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake *Crotalus adamanteus* faeces were also inspected and although teeth were regularly found, the number was not as high as for the pythons.

In the period 1977-84 one of the authors (R.H.) noted on some occasions the presence of fangs in the faeces of Death Adders *Acanthophis antarcticus.* These fangs were only ever seen singly and although when seen they were noted, no attempt was made to closely inspect faeces for fangs. Death Adders commonly shed fangs when being milked for venom during the period 1977-84, although it was noted that fangs were only shed when replacement fangs were in place.

It is well known among herpetologists who are bitten by snakes, particularly non-venomous varieties such as Pythons and Green Tree Snakes *Dendrelaphis punctulatus* that these snakes have a propensity to leave teeth in the flesh of the bitten person. It would be reasonable to assume that this also occurs when these snakes strike at prey items, thereby resulting in the ingestion of teeth with the prey.

It appears that the number of teeth likely to be found in a snake's faeces is proportionate to the number in the snakes mouth. The high number of teeth found indicates perhaps a higher rate of teeth replacement than may have been suspected.

Although it seems that ingested teeth are usually passed through without a problem, Ron Sayers (pers. com.) reported a case of Gaboon Viper *Bitis gabonica* that was found dead after a large fang had perforated the stomach lining. Such problems are presumably most likely to occur in large-fanged venomous snakes.

We are uncertain if non-venomous snakes only shed teeth when replacement teeth are present (as in elapids).

REFERENCE

Hoser, R.T. (1989) *Australian Reptiles and Frogs.* Pierson and Co., Sydney.