

Save the Snakes: Snakebite management and reduction of snake-human conflict

Snakes of Kenya: Total number of snake species, about **140**. **i) Venomous snakes**, about **31** (Cobras, Mambas, Boomsnake, Vine snake, Burrowing asps, Sea snake, Garter snakes, Vipers and Adders; only about **13** are **medically** important and only less than **10** can cause human and livestock death and are mainly Cobras, Mambas, Puff-Adder. **ii) Mild-venomous snakes**, about **37** with small back-fangs and venom that has no effects on humans. Examples: Sand and grass snakes, Beaked snakes, white-lipped Snake, Tree/bark snakes, Centipede-eaters, Large-eyed/Tiger/Cat snakes. **iii) Non-venomous snakes**, about **75** and have no fangs. Examples: Blind & Worm Snakes, Pythons, Sand boa, Green snakes, Egg-eaters, Shovel-snout, Tree-snakes, House snakes, Wolf snakes, Marsh snakes/Water snakes, File snakes and Smooth snakes.

Why conserve snakes? Snakes are part of the ecological balance in the environment. They help control **pests** (e.g. rats and other animals) that destroy our crops and property and are vectors of some human diseases. In leisure, snakes are the key attractions for visitors in snakes parks. For sustainability better have **a live than a dead snake**.

Snake-human conflict: Due to general fear and traditional beliefs, **people kill all snakes** instantly on sight. In many cases snakebites could be avoided if people were more aware of the kinds of venomous snakes in their area and know how to **avoid** them. Snakebite related deaths could also be avoided/reduced if people know what to **DO** and **NOT DO** in case of snakebite and how to administer first aid. Snakebite is a **medical emergency**; so think of **hospital first** and **DO NOT** waste time. Many snakebite victims often die due to **shock**, reliance on **ineffective traditional treatments**; inability to arrive at the **right health** facility in good time; **wrong identification of snakes** by health care providers and also **wrong administration** or **lack of first aid**.

AVOIDING SNAKEBITES

- ❖ **Fact:** Most bites occur on the leg, so **DO NOT** walk barefoot, wear closed shoes and protective clothing.
- ❖ Keep homes clear of snake microhabitats e.g. debris piles like stones, wood etc.
- ❖ Block open holes and termite mounds in your compound.
- ❖ Cut trees that touch houses or long and thick grass, bushes, clear rubbish pits, as these attract rats and lizards that in turn attract snakes.
- ❖ Keep poultry/rabbit cages or pens a distance from residential houses, as these attract snakes.
- ❖ **DO NOT** set up a pit latrine next to bushes, life or dry fence. Snakes use such sites as refuge or corridors.
- ❖ Use a torch while outdoors during the night.
- ❖ **DO NOT** gather firewood at night to avoid mistaking a snake for firewood.
- ❖ Make sure that you raise beds off the floor and doors should properly fit well.
- ❖ **DO NOT** put your hands or feet into places you cannot see e.g. piles of logs, rocks, holes, tree hollows, anthills, rock crevices or caves.
- ❖ **DO NOT** drive over a snake as they can get stuck under the vehicle only to bite later.
- ❖ If you encounter a snake in the wild, leave it alone and do not panic.
- ❖ **DO NOT** tease, play or molest snakes. Purportedly dead snakes fake death.

FIRST AID

Fact: 95% of snakebites are not fatal even if untreated.

- ❖ Take the patient to the nearest hospital as fast as possible
- ❖ **DO NOT** make any cuts or incisions or suck venom.
- ❖ **DO NOT** use potassium permanganate solution, **traditional herbs or black snake stones**, alcohol, pain killers, electric shock, ice packing or rub/massage.
- ❖ Get victim to lie down immediately, reassure and get them to relax (talk to them) and try to be calm as well.
- ❖ For **non-spitting cobras or mambas**; put on **pressure bandage** above the bite site carefully and apply a splint to immobilize the limb.
- ❖ **Cobra venom in the eyes: DO NOT** rub the eyes. Wash the victim's eyes gently with large amounts of a bland fluid e.g. running water (if possible open eyes under water). In the absence of water, use beer, soft drinks, cold tea, saliva, milk or urine.
- ❖ For bites by Adders, Vipers or Spitting Cobras **DO NOT** apply a bandage as this will cause localized tissue damage.
- ❖ **DO NOT** waste time looking for the culprit snake if it has disappeared to avoid another bite.

HIGH RISK TIMES AND SEASONS FOR SNAKEBITES

Beware! Start of rain season after a long dry season; crop harvesting season/dry season; before dusk and 2 hours after dusk.

