

The Measure of Experience

David G. Barker and Tracy M. Barker
vpi@beecreek.net

Growing up as snake lovers some decades ago, we and our fellow snake fanatics knew who the experts were. They were the few people with whom we had any sort of contact who had experience. Now this was not a large number of people. Even counting the authors of the few reptile books that we managed to find in the library, there weren't many experts.

"Experience" to us meant access to snakes. You couldn't get experience if you didn't have snakes. But it wasn't easy to get snakes back then. Even local snakes were a challenge to acquire. There were no publications in our local libraries that detailed how to collect snakes.

Of course, in those days, as in many places today, the local people were convinced that snakes were everywhere. When asked, they would just sort of point to the brushiest spot and wave a hand and declare that "right over there is full of them!" Sadly, we never found that place to which they referred.

Not that many years ago, the pursuit of a snake hobby was a rather isolating lifestyle. In some extreme cases it actually produced hermits, people whose greatest fear was that their neighbors might find out what was in their basement. That wasn't because snake keeping was an illegal hobby back then. There were few city ordinances that specified forbidden sizes or species within municipal boundaries. No, the reason was that snake keepers didn't want everyone in the neighborhood to think they were odd.

It was lonely back then for most of us.

There were no color glossy magazines. There was no classified advertising for reptiles. Most of us growing up in small-town America didn't have access to, much less membership in, regional herpetological societies. There were no weekend snake sales. There were precious few books, and there were hardly any pictures in the few books that we could find in public libraries. It was rare that any pet store would have a snake on display. We couldn't have even imagined the possibility that someday there would be an Internet with reptile sites that pulled in tens of thousands of visitors every month.

This wasn't very long ago.

Of course, back then there existed many wholesale animal businesses that annually imported hundreds of thousands of snakes, other reptiles, mammals, and birds into the U.S. Most of these importers were in Florida, although they existed also in New York and Philadelphia, Texas and California. But these businesses mostly supplied the pet stores in the largest cities, and very few imports trickled out to the mom-and-pop pet shops in Middle America. These reptile wholesalers mailed out monthly price lists featuring items like "boa constrictors at \$4.00/foot" or "horny toads for \$0.60 each." But we never even suspected they existed because what also existed then were *secrets*.

As hard as this may be to believe, snake people actually kept

snake secrets from other snake people. When we were starting out, the few herpers we knew and the few pet stores we haunted would never have considered giving us access to the names and addresses of reptile importers or wholesale businesses. For that matter, most snake keepers wouldn't divulge the maintenance and breeding secrets that they had independently discovered. There were lots of secrets that we the underlings would have to strive to uncover for ourselves.

Today, however, secrets are hard to keep, the snake business has changed, and most keepers have easy access to an incredible variety of snakes.

Now, entering the second decade of the 21st century, an overwhelming amount of information about reptiles is published and readily available. Young keepers can't comprehend what a recent turn of events this is. There are now so many books, magazines, newsletters and websites that it would be nearly impossible to read and absorb all the existing information about snakes. And this is the problem. With so many authors promoted as "experts," how in the world can young keepers know who the real experts are? In whose information should they place their trust?

It's our observation that a new class of "experts" has proliferated, one comprised mostly of well-read, snake-loving people with strong interests and a few snakes. Some of these would-be experts have read and memorized every printed word written about some particular species. They are veritable walking encyclopedias—but with only one or two entries. We have met people who can quote passages from some of the old articles we wrote for *Vivarium* magazine as if they were Scripture.

And, of course, contributing to the creation of this new class of experts is the realization by publishers that snake books sell, and snake magazines sell. There are publishers who comb herpetoculture looking for wanna-be authors, people willing to write on some subject that the market research team at the publishing house has decided will sell. The result has been a flood of publications that, frankly, aren't worth a damn.

Much of what has been written in the past 20 years or so was authored by people with insignificant amounts of experience with the particular animals that were the topics. Then these manuscripts were edited by people with no clue about herpetoculture. They rehash and reinterpret older published information, and all too often they repeat misinformation handed down to us from previous generations who were writing when herpetoculture was so young that it was diapered by Ditmars. Much of what is published on the general topic of herpetoculture today can be described only as poor and not founded in significant experience.

So who are the true experts and how do we identify them? The experts of herpetoculture today are the people with extensive experience with animals, the same as when we were growing up. Herpetoculture is a hands-on activity, not a cerebral exercise. To develop expertise requires time and it requires

hand-on experience. There is no substitute.

For this reason, we propose an actual measure of experience: the “snake-year.” A keeper achieves one snake-year of experience by maintaining one snake for one full year. If a keeper keeps ten snakes for ten years, he or she then has accumulated 100 snake-years of experience. Of course, for lizard people there is the “lizard-year,” and turtle people have “turtle-years.” The snake year is a quantitative measure of experience. It is a means by which a keeper can personally measure his lifetime experience, evaluate the experience of other keepers, and measure the merit of information and advice presented by the tidal wave of pseudoexperts with which we recently have been deluged.

This type of measurement is used by falconers as a gauge of devotion and expertise. For those of you who have not been exposed to falconers, they are the only other group of animal people who just might possibly love their animals with a passion equal to that encountered in the snake world. There are different recognized degrees of falconry based on experience, all the way up to lofty Master Falconer. Different federal falconry permits are required for each level, each granting access to different falcons, hawks, and eagles. For example, a beginning falconer cannot keep a peregrine falcon or gyrfalcon. Perhaps a beginning snake keeper should not keep a reticulated python or spitting cobra.

Of course, it's possible that someone with a lot of snake-years may have learned little, done a miserable job as a keeper, and killed multitudes of snakes. Certainly there are animal importers who have had thousands of full cages of reptiles for dozens of years; most of these people are truly experts at what they do, but there have been a few that were grossly incompetent, able to stay in the business only because of the short time they maintained any animal. In the animal business in general, if people continue working with animals, they gain experience and eventually gain expertise.

Today there are giants of herpetoculture living among us, many of whom are unrecognized by most keepers. These are people with whom one can spend an afternoon talking at a snake show where they are sitting behind their tables. These are the keepers with thousands of snake-years, a degree of experience that in the future may never be equaled. An amazing number of these people are modest snake folk who remain quiet in a crowd while some 15-year-old “expert” with only three snake-years loudly pontificates about how to keep ball pythons or spotted pythons.

Consider, there may be herpetological prodigies, but there are no young herpetocultural experts.

How much experience is a lot of experience? Well, there are quite a number of keepers with 1,000 snake-years, obtained by keeping 100 snakes for 10 years or 50 snakes for 20 years. Even 500 snake-years of experience amounts to a very respectable career with snakes, certainly qualifying one as an expert. Today there are several dozen active keepers with more than 5,000 snake-years of experience. And there are a few keepers among us with more than 10,000 snake-years of experience, some of whom are still keeping snakes!

Unfortunately, many of herpetoculture's greatest experts have not documented their hard-accumulated wealth of knowledge. Some of them are already dead, and many of the rest will disappear almost without a trace. But while they may receive little notice or credit from future generations of snake keepers for the collective body of knowledge generated by their experience, they will have contributed. They will leave behind to the current generation their conversations on the telephone, their shop talk around the beer kegs, their input to panel discussions at annual herpetological meetings, their discussions across the table at weekend reptile shows. Some of their stories may become part of the myth and lore of our world. They will leave behind their trainees and interns who cleaned cages for the fun of it, the kids they have inspired, and in some cases, the keepers they directly taught to keep snakes. In herpetoculture, we build on the experience of the experts who came before us. Just by doing what they love to do, they will have contributed.

We snake people need to be more aware of the varying levels of experience around us in the snake world. Experience does count. Often it makes the difference between life and death, both for the keeper and the kept. It only takes a lot of money to amass a large collection of snakes, but it takes devotion and expertise to keep a large collection of snakes for years. Perhaps it is time that herpetoculture follow the example of falconry. It's easiest for the government to take away everyone's right to maintain venomous and large snake species if we keepers have no bona fide, recognized experts, and if we have no level of Master Snake Keeper to which young keepers can aspire.

Today some of the greatest experts of herpetoculture are living among us, many of them still off in their little worlds cleaning cages. We need to acknowledge their devotion and experience. We need to acknowledge the unit of a snake-year as a valid and necessary means to measure experience and, by extension, expertise. We need to know our experts.