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“I believe that touching a snake opens people’s minds and changes it forever “

Romulus Whitaker at Express Adda.

Whitaker spoke on the myths around snakes, setting up venom cooperative with the Irulas and the importance of zoos.

This edition of Express Adda in Delhi hosted wildlife conservationist and herpetologist Romulus Whitaker. In a discussion moderated by The Indian Express Deputy Editor Seema Chishti and Assistant Editor Sowmiya Ashok, Whitaker spoke on the myths around snakes, setting up a venom cooperative with the Irulas and the importance of zoos.

On being a herpetologist:

The snakes, the crocodiles — I’ve been in love with them all my life. I owe it very much to my dear departed mother who, when I was four and brought a snake home, didn’t say, ‘Get it out of here!’.

Instead, she said, ‘How beautiful, shall we keep it?’. What a way to start. And that was it. For the rest of

my life, I just became a snake nut. When we moved to India, in 1951, however, she began to think differently since we were moving to the land of cobras. She was worried about how her little kid would react to the snakes or how the snakes would react to him. Anyway, it all worked out and I'm still alive. I have noticed that most kids are very interested in little things that creep and crawl, and most parents are not interested in having them interested. Every step of my career was ordained by fate. For example, when I was in school, I brought a pit viper to the biology class and carried it safely in a nice big, glass jar and the biology teacher said, 'Wow, what a beautiful snake! Let's put it on display and keep it in the lab for a while'. So, there's been a lot of encouragement all along.

[Snakes not after us, they are frightened of us: Romulus Whitaker at Express Adda](#)

On his Mumbai days and making films:
That was a very interesting time too. Hobnobbing with the likes of Vyjayanthimala and Dev Anand. (Whitaker's stepfather set up the first colour processing lab in Bombay). I was nine or ten years old. It was all lost on me, quite honestly. When I talk about it now, people are like, 'really, you've met

them?’ We were sitting there watching the rushes of their latest films and it sort of moved something very deep inside me, that reaching out to people through film is really the way to go. We set up the Snake Park in Madras and a million people came there the first year, but every film we have made has been seen by tens of millions of people.

On the Madras of the Seventies:

Madras was a cool, quiet place in the '70s. A good place to start out for what I wanted to do. First of all, to set up a snake park over there was kind of a wild idea. What was incredible was that the chief conservator at the time visited our little snake park, which is way outside the city in Tambaram. He said, ‘It is way out, nobody is going to come here and what if we give you a piece of land in the Guindy Deer Park?’ So, the Madras Snake Park was born. It was amazing, considering that I still had my American citizenship.

On snakes, the underdogs of the animal world
People are pretty derogatory about snakes. It has always been the underdog in the animal world that attracted me. I became very fascinated with bats and toads and things that people usually don't cuddle. I was always a bit against domestic animals — cats and dogs. Lately, my wife has been able to

convince me that dogs are very lovable and we do love the dogs we have at home. But I still am for the wild animal.

On conservation and tolerance among rural Indians:
In India, we've got a level of tolerance among rural Indians that is beyond belief. Nowhere in the world is a country where all its major predators are still existing. We should take that as our big lesson and make sure people continue to feel that way.

On educating people about snakes:
Most importantly, if we didn't have snakes, we would be overrun by rats. They are the snake's favourite food. On the other hand, it's difficult to get people to learn how to avoid snakes and getting bitten. Especially in a country where we have 50,000 people dying of snake bites every year and many more getting permanently injured by snakes; it's avoidable. But getting these messages out there, especially to rural India, is not easy. We are a country steeped in misbeliefs, so it gets a little awkward to say that what your grandfather told you is a lie. One has to do it in a much more diplomatic way and get it across to people that snakes are not after us. Snakes are, in fact, very frightened of us. We have invited them home because we have

invited rats home. The amount of garbage we hand around and the crops we grow are perfect for rodents as well. People often say, 'Don't go into the forest, it's very dangerous. There are a lot of snakes there.' Just the opposite is true. It's 'don't go into the rice fields', that's where the snakes are. Another problem is that a lot of people are bitten while they are sleeping on the ground in their huts in villages by a particular species of snakes called the crate. A simple thing like a mosquito net could prevent that. So, there are simple solutions to these very, very severe problems but getting the word out is our biggest challenge right now.

On losing a python and other adventures:

I was staying in an apartment on Marine Drive in Bombay, and one day I looked in the box and it was gone. So, I had to go to every flat in the building, knock on the door and say, 'My pet is missing. I was wondering if you'd seen it.' And everyone would be thinking of a pussycat or a puppy and would ask, 'What is your pet?' And I'd say, 'It's a python. Not a very big one. It's a smallish python, about eight-feet-long.' You can imagine the reaction of people. Eventually we did find the python, named Samson, in our store room. A similar sort of thing happened on a train journey when I was coming back from

Kodaikanal to Bombay with my sister. I was on one of the upper berths and so was my sister. She reached across and woke me up and pointed to my sand boa who had gotten out of the bag. Luckily, no one else was awake. I quickly jumped down and put it back in the bag.

On the state of zoos in India:

To get into a discussion about zoos would be a little awkward right now. We operate one of the largest zoos in the country, which is the Madras Crocodile Bank with 2,500 animals there and we try and look after them the best we can. I know that some zoos are much better than others and some really don't make the mark. One of the sad things that has happened recently is that we can no longer allow a child to touch a snake. I can understand why this ruling came about because people would mishandle snakes or even a baby crocodile. But if a child gets to touch a snake along with a good explanation and gets to see that it is dry, clean and wonderful to the touch, it opens up a whole new world of excitement to the child. And zoos do perform that wonderful function for millions of city people in particular, who never really get an opportunity to see an animal up close.

On whether the focus on tigers left out other species:

We're all in competition with each other for the support of people for different species. As far as the gharial is concerned, it kind of epitomises clean rivers. The so-called unholy river of Chambal is one of the cleanest large rivers we have in the country. It is a fantastic irony that our holy rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna, are among the filthiest in the world. The gharial can't live very well there anymore. There are a few coming back, thanks to the help from the World Wildlife Fund and a lot of very dedicated people in the Wildlife Institute of India. Chambal is really the last safe repository for the gharial. Another irony is that we have been so successful that crocodiles are literally bouncing back. Where crocodile numbers are increasing, attacks are increasing as well, and now we have to educate people about how to live with crocodiles; not how to conserve them.

On working with the snake-catching Irula tribe:

I met the Irulas in the late '60s. I maintain to this day that they are the best snake hunters in the world. They'll see a small track on the ground and they'll tell you what species it is, when it went this way, where it is now. They were, in those days, hunting

for skins and catching millions of snakes for skins. We exported up to 10 million snake skins a year till the Wildlife Protection Act came into being. When that came into effect, they didn't have a job. The Irulas are not farmers, they are hunter-gatherers. So, there was really not much for them to do. We hatched an idea together, of starting a venom cooperative. We registered a venom society in 1978. They now catch snakes — 8,000-10,000 a year — and bring them to the Irula co-operative, extract venom two or three times and then release the snakes into the wild. This venom is used to make life-saving anti-venom, which is the only antidote available for a snake bite. I am not sure they (Irulas) understand that they are literally saving millions of lives.

On the environmental crisis:

I will look at it in the context of what it was 20 years ago. In terms of awareness and social media, things are looking better than before. At the same time, we have a population that keeps growing. And we have development strategies in India that are pretty disastrous, so there is certainly no complacency. We need to keep at it, but things are certainly looking better than they did.