

New Respect for the Snakes of Swaziland

Devon Massyn

The Kingdom of Swaziland is a small southern African country with an extremely rich reptilian biodiversity. A new revolution in herpetology has begun in Swaziland with the opening of a new reptile park to serve as the home base for new and exciting work. Genetic work on many species is already under way and a new telemetry study on Black Mambas (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) is slated to begin in the near future.

Many residents of Swaziland, who previously knew very little about their indigenous herpetofauna, have developed a newfound respect for local snakes. One new initiative is to educate people in identification and, in some circumstances, even handling of venomous snakes. Some individuals around the country have been trained to handle calls and efficiently manage residential reptile removals. Snakes are killed less frequently than they were in the near past. Locals are even collecting dead snakes found on roads and bringing them in for their scientific value.

This movement started just two years ago when a local woman developed a strong interest in snakes. With the help of her husband, Clifford Koen, Thea Litschka's new passion grew at an amazing rate. In response, residents are now identifying the snakes they once feared, differentiating between those that are harmless and those that are potentially dangerous. Although most still stay clear of reptiles, they will call an expert instead of just killing a snake. One result is that many lives are saved, as many human bites occurred when snakes were confronted.

This new initiative recently opened its doors to international internships. A select few individuals with some experience will have an opportunity to experience the many African species in Swaziland. Interns will work with the captive collection in the reptile park, assisting with breeding efforts and studies of indigenous species. They also will conduct extensive field research and provide educational outreach to local communities.

The country is alive with reptiles! Range extensions and new species records for the country are reported with some regularity, and ongoing genetic work may reveal new discoveries leading to taxonomic changes. The geographic diversity of the nation has isolated many populations, and Swaziland still harbors many locations that have yet to be explored.

For further information please contact Donald Schultz at don@mfezi.com.



DEVON MASSYN

Thea Litschka shows rangers at a Swazi game reserve a Black Mamba (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) just before release. Now, instead of killing them, many mambas found in residential areas are captured and relocated into protected areas.



DONALD SCHULTZ

Philani and Linda, seen here with a Black Mamba, have been working with snakes for about two years and now regularly conduct venomous snake captures and relocations. Blood is taken from snakes prior to release to support genetic research.