

Romulus Earl Whitaker

a conversation with a reptile guru



Romulus, known as Rom to most, famously called the snake man of India is a herpetologist, conservationist, Green Oscar, and Padma Shri awardee whose work has made remarkable contributions to conserve the reptiles of India. When RHATC fellows from Zoo Outreach Organization got an opportunity to meet Rom at the Liana Trust on 29 October 2021, to most of us it was our dream come true. We had a wonderful time conversing with the legend and got to know a lot about his work on cold-blooded animals. Even at the age of 78, he is active and his passion for snakes has not dwindled with age. Thanks to this brilliant snake man working tirelessly for the conservation of reptiles in India who inspires lot of young herpetologists and wildlife conservationists.

Childhood journey

Rom's interest in snakes began at the age of four during 1947 when he first held a snake in his hand in upper New York, in search of spiders and insects during his exploration of the countryside with his friends. He recalls an event with his mother Doris Norden, when he brought home an American garden snake (non-venomous); to his surprise his mother encouraged him and bought him first book on snakes. Rom's mother married Ram Chattopadhyaya, a pioneer in colour film processing and moved to Bombay when Rom was seven. Rom fell in love with the snakes of India and met snake charmers in Bombay.

During his school days in Kodaikanal, Rom met his first venomous snake the Russell's viper that he scooped up with a butterfly net and encouraged by a science teacher to keep it in the aquarium; it built his confidence to take care of the natural world.

Conservation programmes

Rom and colleagues founded the Madras Snake Park in 1970 and Rom and Zai Whitaker set up Asia's first crocodile breeding centre at Madras in 1976 which is now known as the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust & Centre for Herpetology with the specific goal of securing breeding populations of the three species of Indian crocodiles: the Mugger (*Crocodylus palustris*), the Saltwater Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*), and the rarest of all, the Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*).

The park received early support from the World Wildlife Fund and other international organizations for its pioneering research and work in conservation. The campus of 8.5 acre

is now home to 17 species of crocodiles, turtles, snakes, and lizards. The trust drew the attention of lots of tourists, celebrities, and dedicated young volunteers. Rom became a familiar figure in this Tamil city.

Rom set up a snake venom extraction venture outside Bombay to supply medicine producers. He was introduced to the Irulas, the tribal snake catchers during his field trips to Madras to buy snakes. The tribals were not allowed to kill snakes for the skin industry and he and other colleagues helped them start the Irula Snake-catchers Cooperative Society to catch snakes and to collect the precious venom. Rom's innovative idea helped in providing livelihood to these communities.

Rom and colleagues campaigned to save Silent Valley, an iconic Kerala rainforest, which hit the headlines. Creative conservation move was in place with good collaboration in India which gathered a lot of support from like-minded groups.

Rom fell in love with Agumbe in 1971 during his first visit in search of the King Cobra at the invitation of Kenneth Anderson. In Agumbe he encountered a black tail and caught the snake which was a King Cobra and he still remembers his first interaction where he was face-to-face with the king of snakes. He described that he can never forget the feeling of facing that magnificent 12-foot-long snake all alone and the crazy time it took to get it into a bag.

Agumbe Rainforest Research Station (ARRS) is a field based conservation and research organization founded in 2005 by Rom inside the Agumbe reserved forest in the Western Ghats.

Rom headed a long term study on the ecology and behavior of the King Cobra and catalogued the biodiversity of the region. Rom received two awards in 2009, one indigenous: the Salim Ali Award from the Bombay Natural History Society and one from Switzerland: the Rolex Award for Enterprise for his project on facilitating the establishment of a network of rainforest research conservation and bases around India. Many of the people who were trained by Rom are well know herpetologists.

Published articles and documentaries

Rom has published widely over 200 scientific and popular articles plus several books, including 'Common Indian Snakes, A Field Guide'. He has produced, directed, and presented dozens of wildlife films and wildlife documentaries for National Geographic Television, Children's Film Society of India, and others with the King and I being the most popular.

Survival from snake bite

Rom mentioned getting bitten by a venomous snake is so dumb and nothing to be proud of. He thinks all his snake bites were funny

because he did something stupid, like the first, a water moccasin; the log went under as he was reaching for the snake's neck and it turned at the last moment and nailed him perfectly, while he was pinning on a log in the Everglades. The two rattlesnake bites out in Texas were painful.

Rom's opinion

In Rom's opinion, India being a snake country, people and snakes can coexist well. For example, in few villages of West Bengal people are coexisting with cobras and in a place like Agumbe, people worship snakes; they are more tolerant towards them being in their vicinity. Rom says, education and awareness play an important role in understanding the snakes around us.

Change in peoples' perception towards fear of snakes is essential in better coexistence of snakes and humans in India. The need of the hour is for primary health centres to be trained to deal with snake bite.

Ashritha Anoop

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