

The Red Sand Boa Vs. A Quicksand of Superstitions

Most snakes in India are riddled with superstitions while Red Sand Boa is shrouded in them, making it one of the most illegally trafficked snakes in India. Early on, most of us are introduced to snakes along with superstitions as a package deal. Their reputation precedes them in many cases, especially now with the increase in urbanisation, we come across more superstitions than snakes themselves. The Red Sand Boa (RSB) *Eryx johnii* is a snake that is popularly believed to have two heads. In reality, on one end it possesses its actual head while on the other end its tail resembles its head, not to grant someone double the wishes but to protect itself from a predator's attack that could be fatal. A deceived predator attacking its rear end rather than its head could be lifesaving. Unfortunately, the very characteristic that is supposed to save its life has become the reason for its peril in the hands of insatiable humans.

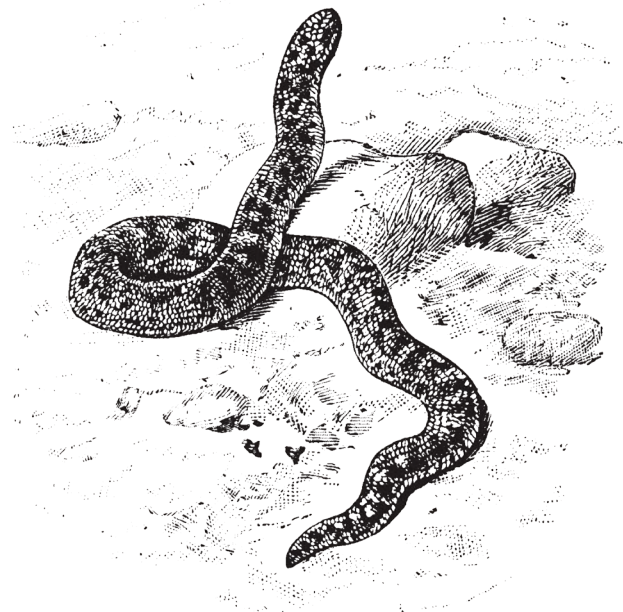
RSB is a docile, nocturnal, non-venomous snake that burrows in loose soil with less vegetation and feeds on mice, frogs, and lizards (Mongabay 2025). There are a slew of superstitions that pull this harmless species out of its place underground. While some believe that it can lead people to hidden treasures (due to its burrowing nature), others believe having it in their house brings wealth or "Lakshmi". It goes by the moniker "Double engine" in the black market and "Do Muha Saanp" (Two headed snake in Hindi) locally, which leads to people believing in the superstition that it is a mythical two-headed snake that has the ability to change their lives (Parmar & Kaiser 2022).

One might wonder what is the harm in keeping a harmless snake in their house and 'taking care' of it. There are a few good reasons why a Red Sand Boa doesn't belong in your living room or pooja room:

1. Illegal: The RSB is listed under the Schedule 1 of the Wildlife (Protection) amendment Act 2022 giving it the highest protection status, equivalent

to that of Tigers. This makes trading it a punishable offence and one has to be permitted by the Chief Wildlife Warden to possess one, which is only given for specific reasons like scientific studies and zoological parks.

- 2. Imbalance** all around you: removing a snake from its natural habitat not only disrupts its behaviour but can also make way for a venomous snake to take its place and bring humans closer to a fatal snake bite. If not that, it will definitely lead to an increase in its prey population, some of which are considered pests by humans that can carry harmful pathogens.
- 3. Superstitions** often come with **cruelty**
 - People believe that the heavier the snake, the more wealth it can attract. This also means that those involved in the business of trading them take to extreme measures like forcing the snake to ingest steel or lead balls to increase its weight (Mongabay 2025), to get a heavier payout as snakes over the weight of 3 kg are preferred. This stresses the animal out and causes physical injuries in the process which can be fatal.
 - RSBs are also rented out for large sums of money, for 'black magic' rituals. Some such



rituals involve extraction of blood, cuts on the body, blunt trauma using hammers, etc. which is believed to 'calm spirits' (Paul 2022). The blood of RSB alone is sold illegally as it is believed to bestow supernatural powers to the consumer and to cure chronic illnesses which is not scientifically proven till date. In one of the more creative superstitious narratives, a meteor shower that supposedly occurred in southern India between 1000 and 1300 AD led to the accumulation of an isotope of Iridium, a rare element, in the tissues of this snake alone, dubbed as bio-iridium, is believed to have the abilities to cure AIDS (The New Indian Express 2012).

- Owing to these superstitions, this species has a high demand in local as well as international markets. Snakes have been found being trafficked across state borders and overseas to countries like Malaysia, China and the Gulf countries for their assumed medicinal and supernatural properties (Antony 2017).
- 4. Compounded crime** - Other than illegal capture and trading, this racket is associated with more crime. There have been cases of assault and theft when the buyers did not agree on a steep prize set by the trader (Paul 2022). In other instances, RSBs were stolen from zoos in Mumbai (Bhagat 2011) and Kerala (Emmanuel 2009) among others to feed the demand.

In addition to the direct threats mentioned above, these snakes face the threat of habitat loss. Since they require dry open landscapes with loose soil to burrow under, the current land use change due to urban development and expansion of human settlements into their natural habitat shrinks suitable burrowing ground to inexistence (Parmar & Kaiser 2022). Despite being protected under the law, compounding factors like these have led to decreased populations and sightings of this species (Mongabay 2025) which, if not rectified soon, could potentially turn this species to be one more that we only hear about.

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