

TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL SNAKES

ROTTE VREET TONNE GRAAN
 PEKING – Die sowat drie miljard rotte en muise in China het verlede jaar sowat 20 miljoen hektaar plaasgrond verniel en sowat 5 miljoen ton graan opgevreë. berig die China Daily
 Sapa-R
M.F. Bates



"Farmers Foe" House mouse eating maize grains
 (Photo: World of Wildlife 5 (63) p. 45).

And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and everything that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good

Genesis 1 25

More than just occupying space, each animal performs some function. Snakes are no exception. Man, the snake's greatest and most irrational enemy, should therefore ponder before he ruthlessly kills snakes. After all, snakes do not constitute a danger to man, since contrary to popular belief, snakes usually flee when encountered, and only retaliate when surprised, molested, or their escape route is blocked.



"Farmers Friend". Mountain adder swallowing a mouse.

(Photo: Broadley - 1983).

Many snakes are a financial asset as they help control rodent populations which in turn may cause great losses to grain farmers and merchants. Cases have been reported of rodents consuming one out of every five bags of cereal. Of the 36 kinds of snakes (species and subspecies) found in the Orange Free State, 14 are known to prey on rodents. The most important are the poisonous Puff-adder, Rinkals and Cape cobra, and the harmless Brown house snake and Mole snake.

Some enlightened farmers and grain merchants have introduced non-poisonous rodent-eating snakes into their sheds and stores, with remarkable success. Not only is money "saved"

but the possibility of plague is also reduced. Two large Carpet pythons introduced to Thursday Island, north-east of Australia, quickly and completely rid the island of its introduced rats which were beginning to destroy the ecology. Similarly in North America, rat-eating snakes are welcomed by many farmers, as are Prairie rattlesnake which feed on Ground gophers which often cause much destruction in the wheat-farming belts, while in parts of Asia, pythons are intentionally placed in grain stores to discourage rats. The Southern African python's value in controlling Cane rats in the sugar-cane plantations of Natal is also well known.

The above illustrates that it will be well worth the while for farmers in the Orange Free State to also consider introducing rodent-eating snakes, such as the harmless Brown house snake and Mole snake into their grain stores; in so doing they can save on grain losses as well as expenditure on rodent poisons. Therefore, snakes should be afforded more protection not in the least because of the financial asset, but also because they are important predators on *inter alia* insects, some of which may erupt into plague proportions and cause considerable agricultural damage.

In conclusion, the saying that "the best snake is a dead snake" should be changed to "the best snake is an alive snake".

