



## Experts gather to give rattlesnakes their due

**RESEARCH: A four-day gathering at Loma Linda University is casting the reptile in a different light.**

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By DARRELL R. SANTOSCHI / The Press-Enterprise

LOMA LINDA - They frighten. They bite. They occasionally kill. But rattlesnakes are not nearly as bad as most people think.

That was the message resonating Monday at Loma Linda University, where more than 300 medical professionals and research scientists gathered to share information at the first Biology of the Rattlesnakes Symposium.

"I don't why we have such a terror of snakes," said Renee Lizotte, a zookeeper at the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson. "I guess we're taught as children."

Lizotte, who lectures on rattlesnakes using live critters to perk up her audiences, says rattlesnakes get a bad rap. Even their venom has good properties, she said.

"We have even started using venom to treat heart attacks," she said. "It has an anticoagulant that can break up blood clots."

When Stoney McDonald of Galveston, Texas, wasn't trying to sell snake-catching equipment to the participants at the symposium, he was defending rattlers.

"When you kill a snake, you increase our rodent population," he said. "Last year, \$17 billion worth of damage was done by rodents. They carry disease, they eat your wood, they mess with the insulation in your home, they tear up wiring. When they eat through wires, they can start fires."

One of the most popular exhibits at the symposium was a room in which Chris Giacoletti of Action Reptiles of Upland tended 20 live rattlesnakes and two venomous lizards: a Gila monster and a Mexican beaded lizard.

"A lot of people want to see stuff they want to have, but they can't have," he said. "The public doesn't appreciate some of the reptiles we have. Here, people know. For a lot of these people, snakes are their whole lives."

Rulon Clark, a rattlesnake researcher from New York's Cornell University, said he came to the four-day symposium in Loma Linda "because this is the only place I know of where all the people who work on that particular animal are together in one place."

He reported on his study of the effect of human population growth and housing development on the timber rattlesnake population. We're killing off snakes as we chew up their habitat, he said, and some species are threatened with extinction. He said that could happen to snakes in Southern California.



David Bauman / The Press-Enterprise

Chris Giacoletti of Action Reptiles of Upland shows a Santa Catalina Island rattlesnake during the symposium at Loma Linda University. This variety of rattlesnake doesn't carry a rattle in its tail.

"I don't think you could help but have that happen based on how rapidly this area is developing," he said. "Unfortunately, rattlesnakes are a low priority for the people who control growth. Statistically, the odds of people getting hurt from rattlesnakes are very low. But they're seen as a threat. They have a big image problem."

The symposium, which ends today, was not just about saving rattlesnakes.

Dr. Sean Bush, a Loma Linda emergency-room physician best known for his appearances on "Venom ER," a series on the Animal Planet cable television network, reported on his experience with an antivenin made from antibodies extracted from sheep.

Only about 15 percent of his patients have experienced allergic reactions to the serum, he said, while a horse-based antivenin occurred produced life-threatening reactions in a quarter of patients and milder long-term reactions in 75 percent of patients.

Even better serums are being developed, he said.

"For me, I think the most important thing to come out of this symposium is the contacts I have made with people in varied scientific" disciplines, he said.

It is the sort of collaboration, he said, that one day will save lives.

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