

San Bernardino County Sun

A show with bite

Snakes star in symposium
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Sunday, January 16, 2005 - LOMA LINDA - Those fangs, that rattle, its venomous bite: Dr. William Hayes likes to call the rattlesnake a "charismatic species."

Yet the charming these snakes have done is to strike paranoia in the public conscious. And experts say they still need much more research on the highly specialized subject.

A conference that continues through Tuesday at Loma Linda University brings together about 275 participants, including some of the most preeminent scientists in this specialized field of study.

Although the many of the presentations are technical, the public is welcome to attend the symposium, which started Saturday.

Indeed, with presentations titled, "Phenology of the Timber Rattlesnake in southern Minnesota: Implications for conservation," and Latin names tossed around in casual conversation, much of this was not for the casual herpetologist.

"We need to better educate ourselves and the general public about these animals," Hayes, one of the organizers of the first Biology of the Rattlesnakes Symposium, said on Sunday.

He and most of the others pointed toward the irrational fear of the rattlesnake, and said the animals shouldn't be feared as much as respected.

Participants came from as far away as Chicago and New York. There were presentations about the red diamond rattlesnake that can be found in the nearby hills of Loma Linda. And the lethal venom of the Mojave rattlesnake.

"As long as you don't step on them, they're just fascinating animals," Michael Cardwell, one of the organizers, said after his presentation on the Mojave rattlesnake, which he has been tracking for nearly four years.

Cardwell, a retired sheriff's deputy, doctors who treat the bitten, and the scientists who study the biter will be discussing today about how they can both work together on snakebite treatment.

"We need to be talking and collaborating," he said.

Inside the halls at Wong Kerlee International Conference Center, on the Loma Linda University campus, the speeches went on, kept to strict 15 minute segments. Much like any class, some in the audience were hypnotized in rapt attention at the slides of photographs and charts.

Tom Anton, who works for a biological consulting company in Chicago that specializes in endangered vertebrates, praised the symposium.

"I'm very impressed with the caliber of the research for such a specialized field," he said. It's particularly needed now, when the habitat of rattlesnakes is being developed, he said.

The last conference that studied venomous snakes was held in Sweden in 2000.

"We couldn't match the venue," Hayes said. "So we got the superstars."

Sunday night the "who's who" of rattlesnake study were honored, including William S. Brown, Henry Fitch and Findlay E. Russell, the last a returning alumnus to Loma Linda University.

For all the academic honors, a room was set aside for the real thing. Walk in and the clacks of the rattles could raise your stomach a foot or two even if the foremost scientists assured you that these were unnecessarily maligned creatures.

Like the scientists, these reptiles are Chris Giacoletti's passion. But they're also his business. He takes his snakes to movies and studios.

So when the capitalistic and academic strata of the snake world meet, how do they get along?

Giacoletti shrugged. A couple weeks ago, he was at a reptile show in Orange County and everyone was asking to see a diamondback rattlesnake.

"Diamondbacks are a dime a dozen," Giacoletti huffed. "We have a lot that are more rare. Here, they can appreciate what we have."