

NOVEMBER 17, 2012

LIFE & TIMES

NEW STRAITS TIMES LIVE IT UP ON SATURDAY

Here to ssstay!

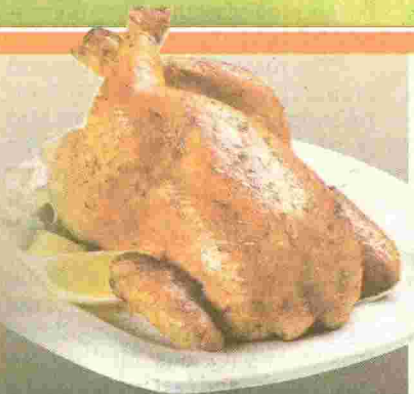
Why the world
needs snakes

→ pages 10 & 11



BROWSER

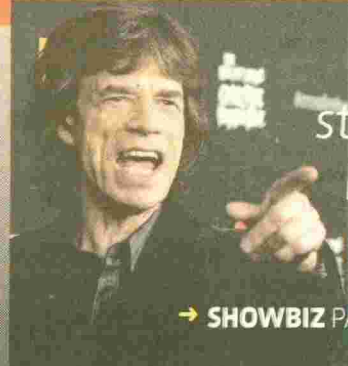
CHICKEN,
THE OTHER
'TURKEY'



→ LIVING PAGE 2

THAT PERFECT
CUPPA

→ LIVING PAGES 4 & 5



No
stopping
Rolling
Stones

→ SHOWBIZ PAGES 16 & 17

LIFE & TIMES **GREEN**

Snakes alive!

Most people squirm when snake is mentioned but take the reptile out of the eco-equation and there'll be dire consequences, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

SNAKES are not often associated with words like wildlife conservation or sustainability. Indeed, it is more common to hear statements like "the only good snake is a dead snake".

Yet, the problem today is precisely that: There are too many dead snakes. And wildlife conservationists are worried.

"Snakes are part of the ecosystem," says Olivier Caillabet, 28, programme officer at Traffic Southeast Asia, the wildlife trade monitoring network. "When you remove them, you're taking little pieces out."

This causes an imbalance that can have some disastrous consequences for humans.

One of the most important roles that snakes play is that they help control the pest population, especially rats. "Until they are three years old,"

explains Caillabet, "pythons mainly eat rats."

When you remove snakes such as pythons and cobras from places like oil-palm plantations, you'll soon find an infestation of rats as rats are predators of oil palm fruit."

Naturally, too many rats in an oil-palm plantation will affect the output. In addition, rats are harbingers of deadly diseases.

Another pest that pythons help to control is wild boars. If the population of wild boars goes unchecked, crops will be destroyed.

Snakes are natural predators, no doubt. However, they are also food for other predators such as eagles which eat serpents. Without serpents, these birds will go hungry. The goal, therefore, is not to completely eradicate trade in snakes and snakeskin.

"What we are trying to do is to reg-

ulate the trade," says Dr Chris Shepherd, 40, deputy regional director of Traffic South East Asia. He admits though, that the problem is not as bad as it used to be.

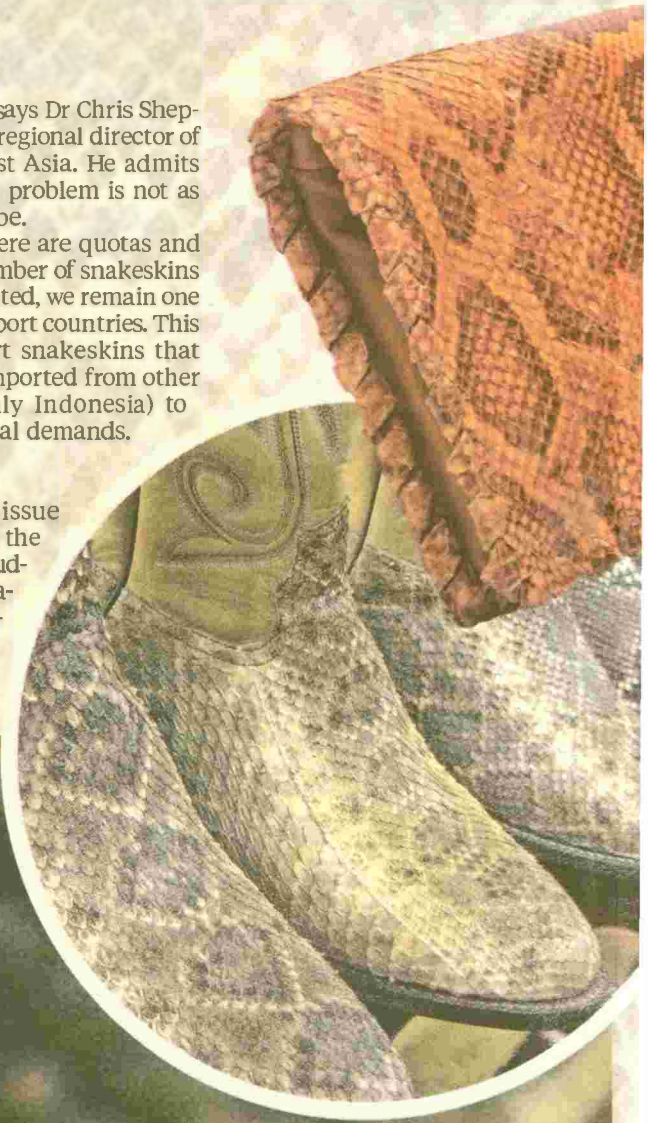
Still, while there are quotas and limits for the number of snakeskins that can be exported, we remain one of the main re-export countries. This means we export snakeskins that are previously imported from other countries (mainly Indonesia) to meet international demands.

THE CHALLENGES

Tied in to this issue of re-export are the challenges of fraudulent documentation and enforcement of regulations. Caillabet is blunt: "Let's



Reticulated python.





Beware the pit falls of buying snakeskin handbags.

bag, you may be contributing to an illegal trade or, worse, the snake could have been killed inhumanely.

The humane way to kill a snake is to knock it on its head or cut its head off. But, Caillabet says, in some places like Vietnam, snakes are inflated with air (like how you would a tyre) or fed so much water they die.

Some defang the snakes. "Do that," says Shepherd, "and the snakes die of starvation."

PET PEEVES

What about people who keep snakes as pets?

Shepherd asks: "Are they responsible enough to look after themselves, let alone a snake?"

Well, it is possible to keep a snake as a pet as not all snakes are venomous. However, you must consider if you can actually keep them as the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 states that you must have a permit to keep certain snakes. Then, there are some snakes, such as blood pythons, which are totally protected. This means you cannot keep them at all.

Even if you are allowed to keep snakes as pets, remember that they are very sensitive to their environment. If the humidity and temperature of their habitat is not right, they simply die. And unlike dogs or cats, snakes don't eat dry food. You have to feed them live mice or crickets. And, you have to continue to do this for years as snakes can live for decades.

Then think about what happens should your pet snake accidentally escape from its enclosure? You're going to be hard pressed to find someone sympathetic enough to help you look for a lost pet snake. It's not quite the same thing as looking for a lost kitten or puppy.

INTERESTING VARIETY

Both Caillabet and Shepherd say we need to appreciate that we have some of the most interesting species of snakes in the world.

"You have the gliding snake," says Shepherd. "They're beautiful and they fly from one branch to another. There are also reticulated pythons, one of the few species of snakes that still has a pelvis. The variety of snakes here is amazing — from saltwater snakes and freshwater snakes to those that live in high altitudes, mangroves and so on."

The lesson Shepherd hopes we will all learn about snakes is this:

"Snakes are part of the ecosystem."

Olivier Caillabet

Wallet made of reticulated python skin.

"When you see a snake, leave it be. Give it some space. Don't pick it up, especially if it's a cobra. Instead, call the wildlife department or Bomba. Don't kill it unnecessarily. And don't buy that snakeskin handbag."

In short, show some respect for this reptile.

face it. When a container arrives at the port and the sticker declares 1,000 cobras, are you willing to open the crate to count the number of snakes in there? Also, what's printed on the sticker may not be what's inside the container.

Dealers and smugglers prey upon such fear.

While trade in snakes and snakeskins may be legal, both wildlife conservationists warn that if you buy a snakeskin garment or apparel, there's "no guarantee that what you've bought has been made using snakeskins sourced from snakes bought with a permit".

Furthermore, taking something like this across international borders is dangerous - there's nothing to stop customs from seizing such handbags if you are unable to provide them with proper documentation that the snakeskins were obtained legally.

"You should ask the person who sells the handbag where the snakeskins come from. If he cannot answer the question, does not want to give you an official receipt with the name of the shop printed on the top or doesn't even know how to answer our question, that's your first indication that something is not right," advises Caillabet. "So by buying the



Caillabet says snakes help control the pest population.