



By MUBITA KATETE

FOR many Zambians, the sight of a snake is enough to spark fear and panic. In most cases, the immediate reaction is to kill it or, if someone has been bitten, to resort to traditional first-aid methods such as cutting the wound or attempting to suck out the venom.

However, snake experts warn that these common practices are not only ineffective but can also make the situation worse.

In an interview, the Director and Lead Trainer of Snake Safety Zambia Marcel Van Driel urged the public to abandon dangerous myths surrounding snake bites and instead seek immediate medical attention.

According to Van Driel, cutting the bite site or trying to suck out venom does not remove the poison from the body and only increases the risk of infection.

“Do not make any cuts at the bite site because the cuts will get infected very quickly. It is also not possible to suck the venom out of the body. Cutting and sucking should not be done.”

Van Driel explained that venom spreads rapidly through body tissues soon after a bite, making it impossible to remove by cutting or sucking the wound.

“We think if we cut the bite, it starts to bleed and the venom flows out. But the venom immediately spreads throughout the tissue. Making the wound bleed does not remove the venom.”

Van Driel also cautioned against relying on commercially marketed snake-bite suction devices, saying they are not powerful enough to extract venom from the body.

Improving snake bite treatment

Beyond educating communities, Snake Safety Zambia is helping strengthen the country's healthcare system by training medical professionals to manage snake bite cases.

The organisation developed the country's national guidelines for the treatment of snake bites for the Ministry of Health, which now serve as official policy on snake bite management.

It has also introduced a government-ap-

KNOW YOUR SNAKES:

WHY SNAKE BITE AWARENESS CAN SAVE LIVES IN ZAMBIA

proved training programme for healthcare workers, covering the country's venomous snakes, different venom types, first aid, diagnosis and treatment, including surgical management where necessary.

The training is conducted regularly and can also be delivered directly at hospitals across the country.

Not every snake is dangerous

One of the biggest misconceptions in the country is that every snake is deadly. Experts say this misunderstanding often results in harmless snakes being killed unnecessarily.

Zambia is home to many snake species that fall into three broad categories - highly venomous, venomous and non-venomous. Learning to identify them can help people respond appropriately while also promoting wildlife conservation.

Highly venomous snakes

Among the country's most dangerous snakes is the Puff Adder, a light-brown snake recognised by distinctive V-shaped markings across its back.

It is commonly found in almost every habitat in the country and grows to an average length of 60 to 120 centimetres. Despite its relatively short size, it is responsible for many serious snake bites because of its excellent camouflage.

Another feared species is the Black Mamba, one of Africa's longest and fastest snakes. It is grey to grey-brown in colour, with a long slender body and can reach up to four metres in length. Found in many habitats across the country, it is known for raising the front part of its body, spreading a narrow hood and opening its black mouth when threatened.

The black-necked Spitting Cobra is another highly venomous species found throughout the country. It is recognised by its black throat and chest and its ability to accurately spit venom towards the eyes of a perceived threat. Adults typically grow between 1.2 and 1.5 metres.

The Boomslang, although generally shy, possesses highly potent venom. Adult males are often bright green while females are usually brown. This tree-dwelling snake inhabits well-wooded savanna and is mostly active during the day.

Also among the country's dangerous snakes is the brown forest Cobra, a long brown snake found mainly in tropical forests. It can grow to over two metres and is active both during the day and at night.

Venomous snakes

Not all venomous snakes are as dangerous as the species mentioned, but they can still inflict medically significant bites.

One example is Boulenger's Garter Snake (*Elapsoidea boulengeri*), also known as the Zambezi Garter Snake. Adults are glossy black or dark brown, while juveniles have distinctive white bands.

This small, mostly underground snake is active at night and is commonly found in moist savanna, floodplains and mopani woodland.

Another is the Rhombic Night Adder, a short, stout snake with a semi-triangular head. Although some individuals lack the characteristic rhombic markings, they are usually light brown or greenish with faint dark blotches.

They are active during both the day and night and are commonly found in marshes and damp savanna.

Non-venomous snakes

Many snakes found in the country pose no venom threat to humans and play an important role in controlling rodents and other pests.

The Southern African Python is the largest snake in the country. Although intimidating because of its massive size, reaching up to 5.5 metres, it is non-venomous.

Although not venomous, it is a dangerous snake because it can give bad bites causing a lot of wounds and they can potentially kill smaller human beings. It kills prey by constriction and



Mr Driel handling a Black Mamba

is commonly found near rivers, wetlands and woodlands.

Another harmless species is the Rhombic Egg Eater, a slender snake specially adapted to feed almost entirely on bird eggs. It is usually active at night and inhabits savanna, woodland and grassland.

The Common Wolf Snake is another non-venomous species often mistaken for more dangerous snakes. It is a small, slender nocturnal snake with a long tapered tail and typically grows to about 40 centimetres.

Awareness saves lives

Snake Safety Zambia says increasing public knowledge about snakes is essential for reduc-

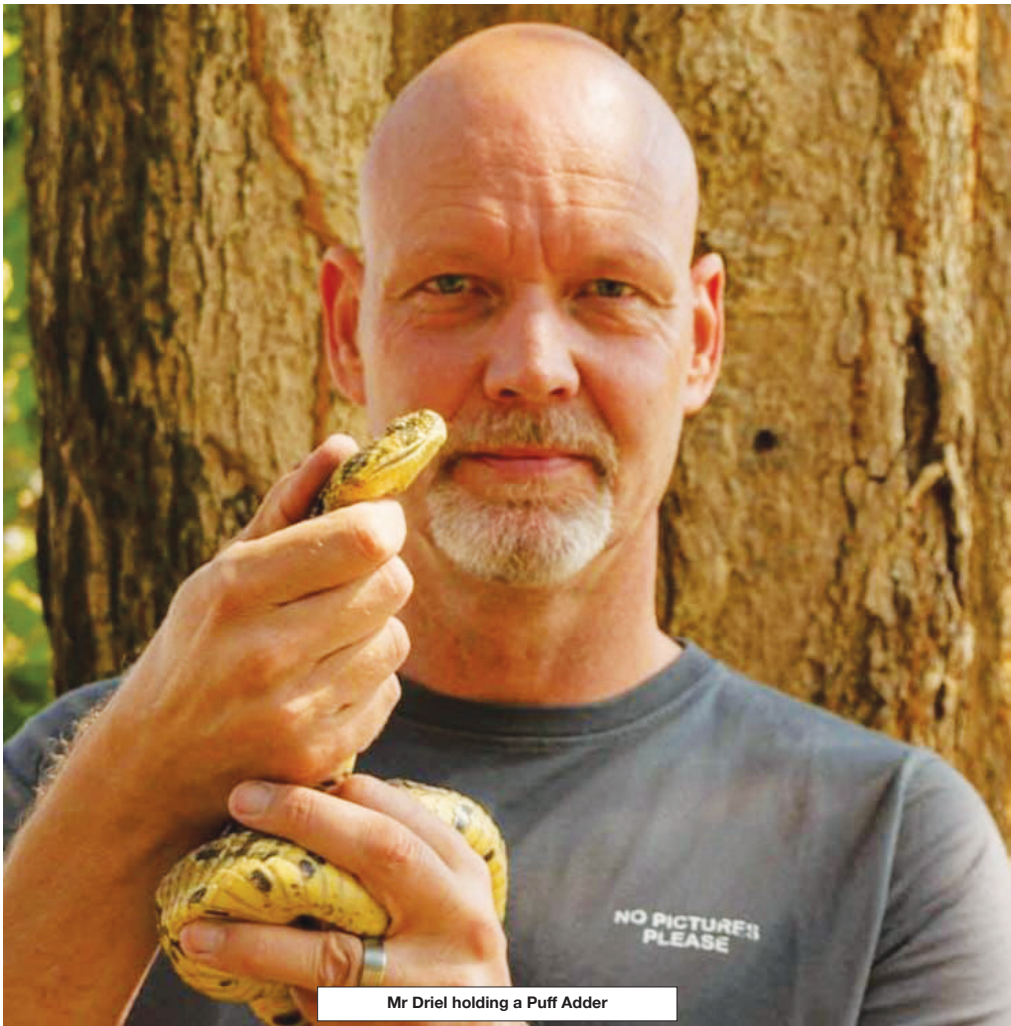
ing unnecessary deaths from snake bites while also protecting species that are harmless and beneficial to the environment.

The organisation encourages anyone bitten by a snake to remain calm, avoid harmful first-aid practices such as cutting or sucking the wound, immobilise the affected limb where possible, and seek immediate medical attention at the nearest health facility.

Understanding the difference between highly venomous, venomous and non-venomous snakes can help Zambians make informed decisions, avoid unnecessary panic and contribute to the conservation of the country's rich biodiversity



Mr Driel lifting a Boomslang



Mr Driel holding a Puff Adder