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Recommended Citation

Khan, F. M., Abbas, F., Nazli, A., Manzoor, M., & Khan, Z. I. (2019). RESCUE AND REHABILITATION OF AN INDIAN ROCK PYTHON (PYTHON MOLURUS): FIRST CASE STUDY FROM PAKISTAN, *Journal of Bioresource Management*, 4 (1).

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RESCUE AND REHABILITATION OF AN INDIAN ROCK PYTHON (*PYTHON MOLURUS*): FIRST CASE STUDY FROM PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Pythons are facing the threat of extinction due to pernicious activities of humans and their interference in the natural habitat of pythons. The Indian rock python (*Python molurus*) has been stated as Lower Risk/Near Threatened by International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Therefore, it is essential to change the perception of people to encourage a positive symbiosis of pythons and humans. Current study involved the rescue and rehabilitation of an Indian rock python (*P. molurus*) spotted at the shrine of Baba Shah Jeevan, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The Python was grasped by skilled snake catchers and taken to the wildlife sanctuary in Balkasar Research Complex, Chakwal, Pakistan for the purpose of conservation. The python was kept in a cage designed for reptiles (especially for snakes) with proper soil bed and shelter. Proper hygienic conditions were maintained in the cage with climbing structures for the python and an adult chicken was fed to it every week. After rescuing, the python was force-fed, however the natural feeding behavior of constriction and killing of prey was resumed by it after a few weeks. Rescue, rehabilitation and release of pythons creates a cooperative environment between pythons and humans instead of a conflict-oriented symbiosis, ultimately decreasing the risk of population decline of large snakes.

Keywords: Indian rock python, *Python molurus*, Rehabilitation, Rescue, Wildlife sanctuary

INTRODUCTION

Wildlife rehabilitation can be described as 'the cure and provisional care of injured, diseased,

and displaced indigenous animals, preceded by the discharge of healthy animals to the wild (Grogan and Kelly, 2013). During the past four

centuries, 490 species of animals have become extinct, thus requiring the implementation of various conservation activities (Magin et al., 1994). *Python molurus* is a snake species found in tropical and sub-tropical areas of Southern Asia, distributed in forested localities of Pakistan and India (McDiarmid et al., 1999). It is commonly known as the Indian rock python or Indian python (Abou-Madi et al., 1994). *P. molurus* has been stated as Lower Risk/Near Threatened by International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) (Balakrishnan et al., 2010) and mentioned in U.S. ESA (United States Endangered Species Act) as endangered (Murphy and Henderson, 1997; Obst et al., 1988).

The Python population is facing the risk of extinction due to multiple factors. Pythons like to live in forests, away from human populated places, however, they come in contact with humans due to pernicious activities of people and their interference in the natural habitat of pythons (Datta, 2018). Human-snake rivalry is another contributing factor towards the dwindling number of pythons (Roshnath and Jayaprasad, 2017). High commercial significance is another factor behind the reduction in python's population. Pythons are hunted for their meat and their skin is a highly coveted commodity in the fashion industry (Hilton-Taylor,

2000). Different parts of a python have value in traditional Chinese herbal medicine (Kasterine, 2012). Moreover, their large size impedes fast movement and contributes to their susceptibility when being hunted and during accidents while crossing roads (Datta, 2018). All these factors pose a major risk to the declining number of pythons. Thus, it is imperative that effective measures are implemented to ensure their conservation.

Mainly practiced conservation activities are rescue, reclamation of injured, poisoned as well as harmed python and their release in forest. Fortunately, people are voluntarily playing their role for wildlife reclamation as an effort to overcome the negative actions of man on species demographics. Ethically, the welfare of the individual casualty must be the first preference and personal as well as professional development should be our secondary consideration.

CASE HISTORY

A large sized snake was spotted at the shrine of Baba Shah Jeevan, Rawalpindi, Pakistan by the local people. The news spread in the area so expeditiously that a huge crowd of people including children ran towards the shrine to have a glimpse of the 'anaconda'. Luckily, some skilled snake catchers from Rescue 1122 rushed to the spot to rescue the snake. They used a hook to catch the snake and tightly pinned the neck.

The ‘anaconda’ was gripped from behind its head followed by grasping the tail and the whole body as well. The ‘anaconda’ was then transferred into a bag with a string at the mouth of a bag. The snake was then taken to wildlife sanctuary of Balkasar Research Complex, Chakwal, Pakistan and identified as Indian rock python (*Python molurus*); a non-venomous species by a professional herpetologist of the sanctuary (Figure 1). A complete medical checkup of Python was done in the veterinary clinic of the center. The length of the python was measured to be around 11 feet while its weight was 100 kg.



Figure 1: Indian rock python (*Python Molurus*) at wildlife sanctuary of Balkasar Research Complex, Chakwal, Pakistan.

The python was kept in a well-designed habitat including a hiding area sufficient for the snake to fit inside and a structure to climb on (Figure 2). Initially the python was fed minced meat with force to

swallow the feed. After a few weeks, the python adapted to the environment and was able to predate upon the live chick fed to it once a week. Availability of fresh, clean, chlorine-free water was ensured at all the times. Python was notified as active and alert, free of mites and ticks, having clear eyes as well as healthy skin. Initially Python was reluctant and feed was given somewhat emphatically. However, with the passage of time, the python adapted and took feed willingly with its natural behavior of constriction and killing of the prey.



Figure 2: Habitat designed for Indian rock python (*Python Molurus*) at wildlife sanctuary of Balkasar Research Complex, Chakwal, Pakistan.

DISCUSSION

Human conflict with wildlife has contributed to the decline in population and extinction of many species, particularly large terrestrial carnivores (Nyhus, 2016). Pythons usually stay in dense forests, away

from human residential areas but due to destruction of forests they come in contact with humans where they are killed by native people disregarding their economic importance. As a result of this pythons are facing the threat of extinction (Datta, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to protect this species from becoming endangered.

Fortunately, people are voluntarily playing their role for wildlife reclamation as an effort to overcome the negative actions of man on species demographics. Previously, rescue of average 5 snakes/day was reported in Kannur district (Roshnath and Jayaprasad, 2017). Rescue of Indian rock python (*Python molurus*) was revealed at Duars, Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, India (Datta, 2018). Snake rescue activities were also reported at the cities of Gujarat State, India (Vyas, 2013). Undertaken study involved the rescue and rehabilitation of an Indian rock python (*P. molurus*) spotted at the shrine of Baba Shah Jeevan, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Rescue actions are crucial for conservation of wildlife and demand further attention from ecologists. Better perception should be given to the public for not seizing the snakes living away from the human inhabited areas. Activities that disturb snake habitats should be discouraged. Relocation to an appropriate distance will ensure the safety of both the community and snakes as well.

Snakes are mainly found in places where their prey (rats) is readily available such as dung heaps and filthy putrid materials. Ensuring the proper waste management and rodent control can stop the snake entering in the house to an extent (Roshnath). Study of sensitivity of herpetofauna towards urban habitat is crucial for long-term conservation measures and risk evaluation (Raxworthy and Nussbaum, 2000). Increased awareness among native communities would assist in conserving the snakes. Awareness classes should be organized in areas with a high population of snakes (mainly rural areas).

Animal conservation authorities and native communities should mutually improve the habitat of the python thus curtailing their propensity to come out from their habitat and invade human inhabited areas (Datta, 2018). We can conclude that changing the perception of people and enabling them to live in a cooperative symbiosis with pythons can play a crucial role in the conservation of this family of snakes. Rescue, rehabilitation and release of this big snake can create a friendly environment in between python and human being instead of python-human conflict.

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