

Collector respects 'hiss' pets

MATT NICHOLLS
Correspondent

Indiana Jones would hate Paul Houston.

That's because the 48-year-old Stouffville resident loves the one thing the fictional archeologist hates. Snakes.

"Collecting snakes is my hobby," the TTC employee says. "A lot of these creatures are endangered species, so I take care of them."

Mr. Houston owns 15 domestic and exotic snakes, including several different types of boa constrictors and pythons. Since he began his hobby some 30 years ago he has owned more than 50 reptiles.

His snakes range in size from several centimetres to almost a metre, and they are kept in a specially-designed terrarium in Mr. Houston's basement.

The terrarium is made of a bullet-proof material which keeps the snakes from escaping, and it accurately simulates the conditions of a tropical rain forest.

"The temperature is quite warm, between 85 and 90 degrees," he said. "These conditions are designed to be just like the snakes' original habitat."

Keeping the snakes healthy is a big chore, Mr. Houston says, and to succeed conditions must be perfect. And that means plenty of food.

"Each snake has a different personality and they all eat in a different way," he says. "Some like their food pre-killed, others don't."

Small rats, rabbits and other rodents are the snakes' main food source. But at \$4 per rat, the costs add up.

"I've spent thousands on my snakes," Mr. Houston says. "But if you like it then it doesn't matter how much it costs."

To offset some of high maintenance costs, Mr. Houston makes public speaking appearances in Metro Toronto area schools to help educate students on snake behaviour, care and saving endangered animals.

He also 'rents' his snakes to production and drama companies who use them in films or plays.

In fact, last month one of Mr. Houston's snakes was used in the opera 'Aida' at the SkyDome. Mr. Houston's snakes are also frequently used in the TV series Friday the 13th.

But using the snakes to generate income is not his main goal. Protecting snakes — and educating others on proper snake care — is.

He says a big part of being a successful snake owner is having respect for the snake. An owner must acknowledge that the snake is wild and he must treat it as a wild animal, he says.

And Mr. Houston says the public should condemn pet stores that sell exotic snakes to people who don't know how to take care of them.

"I can tell you horror stories about some pet stores," he says. "They should be stopped from selling snakes because they sell them to people who aren't educated about snakes. I think individual dealers should sell them."

Mr. Houston also believes legislation should be passed prohibiting the use of snakes in nightclub acts. More often than not, snakes are abused and neglected by these owners, he says.

"We have to educate people at all levels to stop the abuse problem," he said. "Nobody seems to give a damn about it. But we as a general public have to start education soon," to save these endangered reptiles, he said.



Photo/ANNETTE BUCHKOWSKI

Snake collector Paul Houston holds a half-grown Burmese Python. The Stouffville man has quite a collection of snakes including members of endangered species. He keeps them in a terrarium which mimics the climate conditions of their place of origin.

CPR courses offered weekends

Local residents are invited to learn life-saving cardio-pulmonary resuscitation techniques in November, December and January at the Markham Neighborhood Support Centre.

A series of courses offered by the Red Cross Society's Markham branch include both a CPR Basic Rescuer course and one for Infant/Child CPR.

Dates for the Basic Rescuer course, which runs over two days, are:

Nov. 10 (7-10 p.m.) and Nov. 11 (9 a.m.-5 p.m.); Nov. 17 (7-10 p.m.) and Nov. 18 (9 a.m.-5 p.m.); Dec. 1 (7-10 p.m.) and Dec. 2 (9 a.m.-5 p.m.); Dec. 8 (7-10 p.m.) and Dec. 9 (9 a.m.-5 p.m.); Jan. 12 (7-10 p.m.) and Jan. 13 (9 a.m.-5 p.m.); and Jan. 19 (7-10 p.m.) and Jan. 20 (9 a.m.-5 p.m.).

The Infant/Child CPR course is being offered on Nov. 22 and 23.

Cost for the course is \$45 for the Basic Rescuer CPR course and \$30 for the Infant/Child course.

For further information, contact the Markham Neighborhood Support Centre at 471-1620 and ask for Pearl.

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