

Brazil fire burns huge collection of dead snakes

May 16 2010, By TALES AZZONI , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A fire in Brazil destroyed what may be the world's largest scientific collection of dead snakes, spiders and scorpions that served as the main source for research on many species, scientists said Sunday.

Members of the Instituto Butantan said the nearly 100-year-old collection lost in Saturday's fire included almost 80,000 snakes and several thousand specimens of spiders and scorpions. The specimens were used to study evolution and provided information on how to avert extinctions, said institute director Otavio Mercadante.

"The entire collection was lost, the biggest collection of snakes in the world," curator Francisco Franco told Globo TV and other local media. "It's a loss to humanity."

The institute's live animals were kept at a building adjacent to the one burned, and volunteers rushed to remove them in case the fire spread. The fire did not hurt any humans or live animals.

Many of the animals are used in the production of vaccines and biopharmaceuticals, some derived from venom.

Officials said the production of vaccines and other drugs will not be affected.

"Even if we could gather another collection with 100,000 specimens, the historic value would still be lost," researcher Thais Guedes said.

Some of the specimens had not yet been catalogued.

Authorities said an investigation on what caused the fire was immediately opened. A faulty electrical circuit was among the main possibilities being looked into. The laboratory where the collection was located was open only to researchers and students, but authorities did not immediately discard the possibility of arson.

The dead specimens were preserved in flammable liquids, which helped spread of the flames, said firefighter Capt. Miguel Jodas.

Institute officials said they are already working on a plan to start rebuilding the collection.

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