

Do you like snakes, lizards and frogs? Why herpetology might be the career for you

November 9 2023, by Hiral Naik



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

We are so fortunate to share the world with a huge diversity of creatures. For me, some of the most fascinating are reptiles and amphibians. Collectively called [herpetofauna](#), reptiles and amphibians are

ectotherms; they rely on external sources to regulate their body temperature.

A person like me who works with these [groups of animals](#) is called a herpetologist. Among the reptiles and amphibians, my special interest is in snakes. I've always been interested in reptiles, from the days when I would chase common flat lizards in the Motobo Hills in Zimbabwe, where I grew up, and interact with snakes and other animals at our local rehabilitation center.

Still, if somebody had told my teenage self that my job would entail working with snakes and encouraging other people to appreciate them, I never would have believed them. I didn't even know you could make a career out of working with reptiles. Today, I'm studying towards my Ph.D. in herpetology (which is technically a degree in ecology and conservation) while also working with a snake conservation organization in South Africa.

Learning about snakes

Most people will be familiar with zoology, the branch of biology that focuses on the study of all animals. Some animals have their own specialty within the discipline of zoology. Herps (a slang term for herpetofauna) are one example.

There are [more than 4,000 species](#) of snakes around the world. Each species has a unique adaptation to its own environment. Some snakes, like puff adders, are scentless as a way to camouflage themselves from predators. Others, like southern African pythons, show [maternal care](#), which is very unusual for snakes and much more common in mammals and birds.

These unique adaptations have allowed snakes to thrive in [different](#)

[environments](#). This makes them a great model in science: herpetologists can ask questions about their physiology, evolution, ecology and biology.

For anyone looking to become a herpetologist, a basic zoology degree will get you started. Most universities will have someone who specializes in teaching herpetology or someone who can point you in the right direction. Volunteering at institutions that have reptiles, like zoos, is also a great way to get some experience working with them. Once you get to postgraduate level, you can specialize in one of many different topics in herpetology and apply different techniques to answer questions that you are curious about.

As a specialist in reptiles and amphibians, you can merge that interest with other disciplines like photography, law or conservation, and this can open up many job opportunities. You can also pursue further research at a university, become a lecturer or [school teacher](#), work at a zoo or become a museum curator. There are many options to explore.

My research

I completed my MSc in 2017 and my research focused on the evolution of diet in a group of snakes called [lamprophiids](#). I loved learning about how diverse snakes are in the food they eat. For my Ph.D., I wanted my research to have a real-world application, so I waited until 2021 to start after getting some [work experience](#) in conservation.

[My current research](#) focuses on the way that snakes behave (behavioral ecology) to answer some of the bigger question of what leads snakes to bite people. Another year and I will have some answers for you on this.

Snakebite is a [neglected tropical disease](#) according to the World Health Organization and affects millions of people around the world. When [natural spaces](#) are transformed and destroyed, many animals, like snakes,

go looking for food and shelter—often in people's homes. Many people are afraid of snakes, so encounters often lead to conflict as people try to kill the animals and get bitten in the process.

I am also fortunate to work for a non-profit organization, [Save The Snakes](#), which allows me to educate people about snakes and do my part to conserve them by applying my research. My job includes researching information on snakes that live in different parts of South Africa and assessing threats to them, like habitat transformation, learning more about the relationship between humans and snakes, conducting fieldwork and running experiments to understand more about the behavior and ecology of snakes.

The circle of life

I'm also passionate about education.

Learning about the world of snakes has allowed me to appreciate the [natural world](#) in a unique way. [As predators and prey](#), snakes are an emblem of the circle of life. One of my favorite activities is going out at night looking for them (called "herping") and watching them display different behaviors. After the summer rains, frogs and insects come out and the snake predators follow. When I take these moments to observe the world around me I feel fortunate to appreciate these animals in a way most people don't. This is the feeling I like to share in my education efforts.

Some of my favorite moments in my current job have involved seeing the change in people's perceptions about snakes. Snakes have been feared for many generations because of misinformation. Most snakes are harmless. They don't chase people, and they stay hidden much of the time. By sharing the correct information about [snakes](#), we show that fear can be changed to curiosity and that creates more motivation to learn

about them.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Do you like snakes, lizards and frogs? Why herpetology might be the career for you (2023, November 9) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-snakes-lizards-frogs-herpetology-career.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.