

LCQ19: Handling of snakes

Following is a question by the Hon Stanley Li and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (June 14):

Question:

Recently, some rural residents have relayed that the presence of venomous snakes near their residences has caused the death of the dogs kept by them. Under the existing policy, members of the public who spot snakes may, in case of emergencies, call the Police to arrange for professionals to catch the snakes, while the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) does not provide services to trap or drive off snakes. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the total number of requests for assistance about snake presence received by the Police in each of the past three years and, among them, the number of cases relating to venomous snakes and Burmese Pythons, as well as the resources involved in following up on snake presence; whether it has gained an understanding of the difficulties encountered by frontline police officers in handling snake presence;
- (2) given that AFCD is responsible for conserving flora, fauna and natural habitats in Hong Kong, whether there is a division in AFCD currently responsible for following up on snake-related matters; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) whether the Government has plans to transfer the responsibility for following up on all situations of snake encounters and snake-related problems to AFCD; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (4) whether AFCD has plans to set up an interactive database on which members of the public may check at any time the places where wild animals and reptiles may be present, so that members of the public (particularly hikers and rural residents) can be made aware of the potential dangers in advance and take corresponding precautionary measures; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (5) given that Burmese Pythons are protected wild animals under the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance (Cap. 170), of the liability to be borne by members of the public for causing death or injury to Burmese Pythons by mistake under emergency situations; and
- (6) which government department(s) can members of the public report to and seek assistance when they spot snakes under non-emergency situations at present?

Reply:

President,

Snakes are common wild animals in Hong Kong's countryside, and they play a part in the ecosystem by preying on small animals like frogs, lizards and rats. Most species of snakes are wary of humans, and they rarely disturb humans or stay within areas of human activities unless provoked or acted out of defending their territories. Having consulted the Security Bureau and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), our consolidated reply to the various parts of the question of the Hon Stanley Li is as follows:

(1) In the past three years, the total number of requests for assistance related to the presence of snakes received by the Police are as follows:

Year	No. of requests for assistance
2022	3 078
2021	3 148
2020	3 298

The Police does not keep records about the types of snakes, including the number of injuries involved, in the above cases. The relevant work is handled with existing resources and manpower, and the Police does not maintain figures on breakdown of the resources spent on handling the relevant cases. Under normal circumstances, if the Police finds a snake or receives a report on snake discovery, and the circumstances indicate that the snake may pose a risk to public safety, the Police may take action to capture it. If it is necessary to capture or remove the snake found, the Police will hire snake catchers (usually snake dealers by trade) to assist with the action. If the snake is caught successfully, the Police will deliver it to Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden (KFBG) for further handling. Due to the limited number of people who can provide snake-catching services or the remoteness of the snake catching sites, the Police may need to be present at the scene for a long time in order to complete the snake capture operation. At the same time, the Police also needs additional manpower and time to transport the captured snakes to KFBG. In such circumstances, more manpower and time than expected may be required. On the other hand, the Police will not take action if the circumstances show that the snake found does not pose any danger to humans or if it disappears before the snake catcher arrives.

(2), (3) and (6) The AFCD has been using various channels to educate the public on do's and don'ts when encountering snakes, advising them to stay calm and keep a safe distance from the snakes, and allow the snakes to retreat on their own. For non-emergency situations, the public may call 1823 to contact the AFCD. In general, if snakes are causing nuisance, the AFCD would provide advice on preventative measures such as removing debris around the living area, cleaning garbage and clearing weeds on a regular basis to reduce snake hiding places, and maintaining environmental hygiene so as to

reduce the chance of attracting rodents which may attract snakes. The AFCD would also advise dog owners to avoid letting their dogs wander into countryside areas alone, especially during nighttime, to avoid encounters with wild animals such as snakes which may pose a danger to their safety. When visiting countryside areas, the public should wear long pants and closed-toe shoes, and avoid areas with tall grass and bushes. In case of a snake-related emergency, the public should immediately contact the nearest police station or call 999 for assistance. The Police maintains a list of professional snake catchers who would be called to arrive at the scene for assistance. This allows the public to receive the necessary assistance through the Police at any time, including snakes catching and providing assistance in arranging medical rescue services in case of emergency. The AFCD and the Police have distinct responsibilities in handling snake-related situations, and the current division of duties is effective and appropriate. Even if the AFCD establishes its own 24-hour snake catching team, they would likely encounter the same situation of taking long time for completing the snake catch and transfer operations. From the overall manpower and resources perspectives, the prevailing arrangement is considered more suitable. The Government will continue to monitor the situation and review the arrangements as necessary.

(4) At present, there are some 53 species of snakes found in Hong Kong, inhabiting in various habitats including woodland, shrubland, grassland, cultivated fields, mangroves, marshes, streams, ponds and near-shore waters. They serve essential functions in maintaining a balanced ecosystem. The public may access information about venomous native land snakes on the following AFCD's website: www.afcd.gov.hk/english/conservation/hkbiodiversity/speciesgroup/speciesgroup_veno_snake.html. In addition, to enhance public understanding of Hong Kong's rich biodiversity, the AFCD is developing a Biodiversity Geographic Information System (BGIS) which is expected to be launched in 2024. The BGIS will display on a map the spatial data of local species, including those of various terrestrial snake species.

(5) According to the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance (Cap. 170) (the Ordinance), it is illegal to hunt, wilfully disturb, possess, or control any protected wild animals without permission. The Burmese python is the only wild snake species scheduled as protected wild animals under the Ordinance. The AFCD will investigate any reports of harm done to protected wild animals, including Burmese pythons. In general, the AFCD will take enforcement action only if there is evidence found in wilfully disturbing or harming protected animals. On the other hand, when encountering a snake, the public should remain calm and avoid contact with it. They should seek help from the AFCD or the Police if necessary.