



Dan Speake holds an indigo snake

## Researcher trying to save the indigo

By ROBERT MOUNT  
Staff Writer

In the late 1940s, a shiny, blue-black, good-natured snake, the indigo, could be found in relative abundance in South Alabama. They shared living space with diamondback rattlesnakes and gopher tortoises in burrows as deep as 14 feet into the sandy soil. Indigos exceed lengths of eight feet -- making them the largest snakes in North America.

Mankind encroached upon their habitat, sometimes unwittingly as when developing an area, and sometimes cruelly by pouring gasoline into the burrows to force the inhabitants out -- for the hide of the rattlesnakes. Although the indigo snakes were normally released, the fumes from the gasoline killed them, sometimes as long as two weeks later, according to studies by Auburn University's Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit's supervision.

The number of indigo snakes declined, and in 1954 a herpetologist conducting studies on the indigo snakes recorded the finding of the last one in Alabama.

Recently the snakes were placed on the federal "threatened" list, and now an effort is under way, spearheaded by Auburn University, to reintroduce the species to Alabama.

In the first stage of reintroduction, adult "breeder" indigo snakes were brought to the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Center at Auburn University. Dr. Dan Speake, heading "Operation Indigo," then coaxed the snakes to reproduce.

Six hundred offspring were hatched, and released onto 18 protected land sites in South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama--half in Alabama.

In the second phase of the operation, currently under way, Speake and his assistants periodically monitor the location where the snakes were released.



...were released. The locations  
"We've got at least one Alabama location where the snakes  
are pretty well re-established -- breeding and whatnot,"  
Speake said. "It's a little premature to talk success at this  
point, though."

When monitoring the snakes' progress, Speake employs a  
camera-tube with a video monitor to scan the floors of gopher  
tortoise burrows. It was during one of these monitoring  
sessions that Speake and a graduate student became the first  
herpetologists ever to discover an indigo snake nest in the  
wild. The work is done in the winter when the snakes are like-  
ly to be burrowing.

Temperatures in the burrows are consistently in the 50s,  
despite outside conditions, Speake said.

The labor is not without its lighter moments.

"We were out with a camera tube one day, and a guy named  
Gene Carver was feeding the tube down into the burrow, and  
he was seated. Two times diamondback rattlesnakes came  
boiling out of the burrows, and Jumpin' Gene would leap into  
the air, from a sitting position," Speake recalled. "We still  
don't know how he managed it."

Speake kept a variety of snakes as a young boy growing up  
in Decatur. As a result of "a bunch of scared old ladies," an  
ordinance was passed that made it illegal to keep snakes

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# Speake began love of snakes as child

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within the city limits.

"People started all kinds of rumors," he said. "They said I was releasing rattlesnakes, copperheads and water moccasins all around town. They even started finding nests of 'rattlesnake eggs,' which is unusual because rattlesnakes give birth to live young."

Speake's parents didn't discourage him from his involvement with snakes -- until a sturdy brown copperhead sunk its fangs into his arm when he was 14.

"I was pretty far out in the woods when it happened, so I treated myself with a knife and a shoelace," he said. "Then I hitchhiked home. I told the guy that gave me a ride all about it, but kept it a secret from my dad. Then, to my surprise and dismay, the local newspaper ran a story about it. My dad forbade me to do any more collecting, but eventually gave in."

Speake maintains a variety of snakes, both venomous and non-venomous, at the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Center, and frequently shows the snakes to groups.

"I wish everyone was educated about these snakes, especially the indigos. They're handsome, beneficial and very threatened," he said. He is most vocal about the annual Opp Rattlesnake Rodeo. Hundreds of diamondback rattlesnakes are captured, dead or alive, and brought to the event.

"The harm done to the animals which share their burrows is unbelievable," he said. "Not only do they kill the rattlers, but everything else in the burrow, too. I'd like to see that particular carnival outlawed in a hurry."

While Speakes' No. 1 project is saving the indigo snake, he is involved with a number of projects to reintroduce other threatened species as well.

The gopher tortoise, extremely scarce throughout much of its range, has been officially designated as "threatened," and is being studied. Preliminary research is being conducted on the black pine snake as well, another harmless, beneficial snake, Speake said.

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