



KERALA FOREST DEPARTMENT

GUIDELINES FOR THE RESCUE AND RELEASE OF SNAKES FROM THE HUMAN DOMINATED AREAS BY CERTIFIED SNAKE HANDLERS

Kerala Forest Department acknowledges the contributions of various officers of the Department and other experts involved in the science and practice of snake rescue, in formulating this document.

DOMINATED AREAS BY CERTIFIED SNAKE HANDLERS

1. **Background**

In Kerala, snakes can be found in almost all kinds of habitats and they are the integral part of the ecosystems, where they are found. Snakes often use human dominated areas also as part of their habitat, in such cases; their mere presence in human dominated areas will create panic among the people. This may be because of the wrong notion among the people that all the snakes are venomous and by nature they will attack human beings. Nevertheless instances of loss of human life and injury due to snake bite in the state are also rampant. **Records indicate that about 334 human deaths and 1860 human injuries occurred due to snake bite, in last 3 years in the State.**

The situation becomes complicated when snakebite is reported and the snake suspected to be associated with it is caught along. Such a situation calls for quick action from the side of administrative machinery to rescue the snake or else it may get killed by the angry mob. All the venomous snakes and non venomous snake species found in India are listed in Schedule I, II & IV of Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and hunting or attempt to hunt any such species is an offence. As per Sec. 2 (16) (a) – (c), *hunting includes capturing, killing, poisoning, snaring, or trapping of any wild animal and every attempt to do so, driving any wild animal, injuring or destroying or taking any part of the body of any such animal, or in the case of wild birds or reptiles, damaging the eggs of such birds or reptiles, or disturbing the eggs of such birds or reptiles.*

Forest Department is the agency to implement the provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 in the State. The field functionaries in the Department receive a number of calls/complaints from the public regarding presence of snakes in their homestead or surrounding areas. All these calls/complaints cannot be effectively redressed by the staff alone owing to their shortage and limitations in quickly accessing all such areas where the incidents are reported. Thus most of the snake rescue operations are mediated through snake catchers, who volunteer for the same. Though most of the snake catchers are skilled and are known to act in a responsible manner by understanding the ecology and behaviour of the snakes but actions of some of them have raised allegations by their unscientific approaches like not taking necessary protective precautions, doing stunts and displaying snakes in public thereby causing unwanted stress to the animal, posing risk to own and others lives. Of late, the allegation of supplying snakes to kill people is also reported in the State.

Section 11 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 states that the Chief Wildlife Warden, or the authorised officer may permit any person to hunt any wild animal if he is satisfied that such animal has become dangerous to human life.

It is under these circumstances that the Kerala Forest Department issues the present guidelines.

2. Scope

The present guidelines are intended to streamline and bring in more accountability in the process of rescue of snakes in human dominated areas and release them in their natural habitat.

- i. Henceforth only the Certified Snake Handlers are permitted to carry out all the snake rescue and release operations in the State, by following these guidelines, failing which will invite penal actions as per the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
- ii. Rescue of snakes shall be attempted only in such cases where its presence is life threatening. For eg, within a house or in close vicinity.
- iii. Rescue of non venomous snakes shall be avoided to the maximum possible extent and it may be mainly limited to venomous snakes.
- iv. Kerala Forest Department may make use of the services of Certified Snake Handlers to create awareness among the local people about the ecological importance of snakes, identification of snakes and steps to avoid snake bites.
- v. The Certified Snake Handlers are volunteers and Kerala Forest Department will not have any obligation for effecting any payment towards their services.
- vi. Any one causing hindrance to completion of rescue by a Certified Snake Handler, as per these guidelines, is liable to penal action. Actions such as creating mob panic, showing off the rescued snake(s) publicly and any other publicity stunts with the snakes, even by the Snake Handler himself are also liable to penal action.

2. Objectives

- i. To create a network of trained and Certified Snake Handlers throughout the State so as to bring in more professionalism, responsibility and accountability
- ii. To ensure rescue and release of snakes in a safe and scientific manner, taking in to consideration the ecological and behavioural factors of

snakes and wellbeing of humans

- iii. To keep track of the incidents of rescue and release of snakes in the State and to maintain and update the database for the same.
- iv. To prevent any illegalities or malpractices that may occur due to misuse of rescued snakes

4. **Application to be a Certified Snake Handler**

- i. Application shall be called from interested individuals, of not below 21 years and not more than 65 years old, through an advertisement in local newspapers and also through the official website of the Department, for certification of snake handlers.
- ii. The application in the format given as **Annexure I**, shall be submitted by skilled and experienced snake handlers, to the Assistant Conservators of Forests (Social Forestry) of each District. The curriculum for Beat Forest Officers at State Forest Training Institutes will include sessions on safe handling of snakes. Department staff with such skill and acumen may also apply in the same format to the concerned officers, through proper channel.
- iii. The Assistant Conservators of Forest (Social Forestry) through an appropriate team of experts, shall objectively screen the applications received, based on their merit and make a select list of Snake Handlers. Following parameters shall be considered and given due credit accordingly for the selection process:
 - a. Number of rescue operations already conducted by the applicant
 - b. Issues or allegations raised against the applicant in connection with previous snake rescue and relief operations.
 - c. Age, health and conduct of the applicant: Healthy individuals, without known alcoholism or such behavioural traits shall be chosen against others.
- iv. The short listed Snake Handlers shall be called for a mandatory training on safe and scientific handling of snakes.

5. **Training and Certification**

- i. The shortlisted Snake Handlers shall be given a mandatory training for two days on safe and scientific handling of snakes by the experts in the field covering the topics as given in **Annexure II**.

- ii. Those individuals who have attended and have successfully completed the training only shall be given certification as Certified Snake Handlers as per the Section 11 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The format for certification is given as ***Annexure III***.
- iii. Certification will be valid for 5 years from the date of issue. Renewal of certification shall follow the same procedure as afresh.
- iv. Assistant Conservators of Forest (Social Forestry) of respective districts reserves the right to withdraw or cancel the certification issued to any of the snake handler, if it is found that the certified snake handler is involved in any Illegal or unethical practices, or if the rescuer withdraws voluntarily from the service.

6. Publicising the details of Certified Snake Handlers

Details of the Certified Snake Handlers shall be informed to various Local Self Government institutions, all officers of Forest Department Fire & Rescue Services, local Police Stations etc enabling immediate contact and access to the nearest Snake Handler in response to an incident. The list shall also be uploaded in the official website of the Forest Department and other related websites.

7. Duties and Responsibilities of Certified Snake handlers

- i. To respond to all genuine calls/requests informing about the presence of snakes in human habitations.
- ii. To inform the concerned ACF (Social Forestry) regarding the incident and about the call/request received.
- iii. To inform the caller the immediate precautions to be taken to avoid injury/fatality to humans as well as to the snake and to provide the following instructions to the caller, before reaching the place of incidence:
 - a. Not to disturb the snake if it is resting.
 - b. Observing the movement of the snake from a safe distance if it is moving.
 - c. Not to capture the snake on their own, injure or kill the snake out of panic.
 - d. If the presence of snake is in the natural environment, where it doesn't pose any direct threat to human life, if it is feasible, to leave the snake to escape on its own.
 - e. To obtain photograph of the snake from the caller, wherever it is feasible, for quick identification.
 - f. To inform the caller, the approximate time to reach the site.

- iv. To ensure the safety of people by asking the onlookers and other people to move away, once he reaches the place of incident.
- v. To protect themselves with required protective gear and safety equipments.
- vi. To use appropriate light source like head torch or handheld torches during the rescue operation, in places where there is no sufficient light.
- vii. To handle the snakes in a professional way as defined by the Forest Department and as specified during the training, by using proper tools and equipment and also by adapting the handling method most suited for the snake to be rescued.
- viii. To set the rescue kit properly before handling the snake.
- ix. To handle the snake safely and transfer it in to the snake bag in a way so as to cause minimum trauma to the snake and without causing injury or death of snake. Usage of tongs for capture of snakes should be discouraged and eventually stopped.
- x. To take special care and adapt safe bagging methods like use of dark towels, pipe or tubing method, while rescue of snakes that are injured, that are gravid and those that might have recently fed, with a conspicuous stomach bulge.
- xi. To focus at their task and not get distracted themselves by talking over phone, taking videos, addressing the crowd etc.
- xii. Snakes in male-combat/mating/feeding must be monitored closely without disturbing and rescue attempted later, only if unavoidable.
- xiii. Incubating snakes with eggs should not be disturbed to the maximum possible extent.
- xiv. Not to open the rescued snake for public display or entertainment.
- xv. To avail immediate first aid for self and also to provide the same for the affected individual, followed by urgent professional medical care, if any incidents of snake bite occurs during the rescue operation.
- xvi. To create basic awareness among the people on the role of snakes in an ecosystem and also that all the snakes are not venomous and need not be captured. Awareness creation should not be done by exhibiting the snake in public.
- xvii. To explain to the residents the identification of common snakes, precautions to avoid snakes entering the house and first aid in case of snake bite.
- xviii. Not to recommend to the public any unproven substance to keep away the snakes or recommend any unscientific treatment protocols.
- xix. To fill in and submit the proforma in the format given as **Annexure IV**, to the Assistant Conservators of Forests (Social Forestry). Once the

specified App for tracking snake rescue is in place, details shall be entered through the same.

8. Considerations of release of rescued snakes

- i. All release of snakes shall be made as soon as possible and only in the presence of officials of the Forest Department.
- ii. The rescued snake, if injured, should be released only after ascertaining the fitness and its health condition, in consultation with the officials of the Forest Department.
- iii. If the snake appears to be a non-native species, it shall not be released, but handed over to the Forest Department.
- iv. Location for the release of the rescued snake shall be finalised based on the species, its ecology and behaviour and the accessibility to the natural habitat most suitable for the species.
- v. Locations of maximum proximity to the place of rescue shall be chosen for the non venomous snakes.
- vi. Utmost care shall be taken to avoid repeated release of snakes to the same area because it may disturb the local ecological balance.
- vii. Simultaneous release of snakes of same or different species at the same release point should not be done.

9. Duties and Responsibilities of the Forest Department Staff

- i. All rescue operations are to be done in the presence of staff of Kerala Forest Department as far as possible.
- ii. Assistant Conservators of Forests (Social Forestry) shall compile data of snake rescue and release done in the District on monthly basis.
- iii. Assistant Conservators of Forests (Social Forestry)/ Deputy Conservator of Forests/ Divisional Forest Officer/ Wildlife Warden may arrange for necessary logistics for the rescuer as and when sought.
- iv. The RRTs, other field units of the Department and registered wildlife NGOs dealing with snake rescue may arrange necessary facilities for observing and providing treatment to the injured snakes, till they are fit to be released to the wild.

10. Maintenance of Rescue and Release Data base

Assistant Conservators of Forests (Social Forestry) shall maintain and update the database on the snake rescue and release operations in their areas of jurisdiction based on the formats submitted by the certified snake handlers. The proforma for maintaining District wise database is given in **Annexure V**. Monthly abstract will be submitted to the Chief

Wildlife Warden.

11. Insurance to the Certified Snake Handlers

The certified Snake Handlers shall be provided protection under Group insurance coverage by the Forest Department, considering the risks involved in the task.

12. Essential tool kit for Snake Rescue and Release

The Certified snake handlers shall be provided with essential tool kit as given in ***Annexure VI***, by the respective Assistant Conservators of Forests (Social Forestry).

Annexure I

Application for Certified Snake Handler

Name of the applicant	:	
Age & Gender	:	
Permanent address	:	
Present address	:	
ID proof (Type & No)	:	(Self attested copy to be submitted along with)
Educational Qualification	:	
Fresh application/Renewal	:	
Details of past rescue and release operations	:	
Whether involved in any forest offence, police case etc? If so, details and present status	:	
Blood Group	:	
Any recurring disease/health condition for which continuous medication is adopted	:	

I declare that the above given details are true to the best of my knowledge and also submit that if I am selected as a Certified Snake Handler by the Kerala Forest Department, I shall abide by all the related laws and guidelines and directions of concerned officers and that I shall never attend any snake rescue or release operation in an inebriated state. I also declare that I am volunteering my service without expectation of any remuneration and also fully understanding the risk involved in the process.

Place :.....

Date:.....

Name

Signature.....

Annexure II

Topics to be covered in the 2 Day Training for the Shortlisted Snake Handlers

Sl. No	Topic
1.	Objective of the training
2.	Snakes of Kerala (Pattern, Scallation) Basic Biology, Morphology and Ecology, behaviour and their role in the ecosystem
3.	Scientific Classification of snakes and Basic Taxonomy, Identification of snakes, Distribution, Types (Venomous- Mildly Venomous– Non-Venomous)
4.	Snake bites-identifying species from bites, Impact on health, mode of action of different toxins
5.	Overview of human - snake conflict in the State, safe living with snakes Role and responsibility of Certified Snake Handlers
6.	Emergency First Aid
7.	Snake Rescue- Science, principles and common methods –Field Session (Various aspects of rescuing snakes, Good and bad rescue practices)
8.	Personal safety –preparedness
9.	Use of tools and equipments
10.	Important legal aspects and guidelines with respect to snake catching and release
11.	Assessment of the learning during the workshop
12.	Feed back on effectiveness of this training



Kerala Forest Department

CERTIFICATE

Passport size
photograph of
Certified Snake
handler attested
by officer issuing
certification

Kerala Forest Department recognises that Shri/ Ms
.....
..... (name), of
..... (address) is a Certified Snake Handler for rescue
of snakes endangering lives in habitations and for release of the same to
appropriate habitats as per the guidelines issued in this regard.

His/ her Certification code is and validity
of this certification is for 5 years from the date of issue.

Place :.....
Date:.....

Signature.....
Name:.....
Designation:.....
District:.....

Annexure IV**Proforma to be submitted by the Certified Snake Handler to the ACF (SF)
after each rescue and release operation**

1.	Species of snake	
2.	Quantity	
3.	Male/Female/Gravid/with laid eggs	
4.	Location of incident	
5.	District	
6.	Name & Contact details of the person who informed the incident	
7.	Date and time of rescue call	
8.	Date and time of rescue	
9.	Reasons for delay, if any to effect the rescue	
10.	Any trouble while rescuing/releasing	
11.	Forest officer contacted to inform the incident	
12.	Any casualty occurred prior to/while/after rescue/release	
13.	Condition of rescued snake?	
14.	Whether released/not?	
15.	If not, the reasons	
16.	If released, details of location of release	
17.	Condition of snake at the time of release	
18.	Name & Certification code of the Certified Snake Handler	
19.	Signature of Certified Snake Handler	

For Office Use

Verified the entries made by the Certified Snake Handler and are found correct.

Assistant Conservator of Forests (Social Forestry)

Date:

District.....

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Tool Kit

1. PVC Pipe & Bag
2. First Aid Kit
3. Torch/Headlamp
4. Snake bite Bandage
5. Snake hooks, Handled Frame with Cloth Bag of 2.5X0.8 m
6. Snake Bags – for smaller and medium size should be at least 1mX 0.5 m; For larger snakes, it should be at least 2m X 0.8 m, made of cloth with dark colour preferably dark green, dark blue or black.
7. Personal Protective Equipments