

## Grab Bag

Something extra for this month's programming

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# It's Charming: Snake Charmers in India

## Getting Started

- This is a copy of the complete activity for the facilitator. It includes a history of snake charming and things to talk about with trivia facts in the form of questions.
- Print the [pictures](#) to pass around or display on the television.
- Check the [Additional Activities](#) for more information to bring to the activity.



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# It's Charming: Snake Charmers in India

## Introduction

One of the quintessential activities associated with India is snake charming. What is the history of snake charming? Are the snakes really hypnotized? Do snake charmers still exist in India today? Find out with this activity.

## What Is Snake Charming?

While ancient Egypt had a form of snake charming, the current practice arose from India and is associated with that country. Because most cultures associate snakes with evil, the snake charmer was thought to be a holy man and a healer, able to keep wickedness at bay.

Snake charming is a practice in which a man, usually dressed in a turban, appears to hypnotize a snake by playing a flute-like instrument called a pungi. The snake (a king cobra is the species of choice for snake charmers) rises from a circular woven basket and sways in time to the music, seemingly mesmerized by the charmer's tune.

The truth is, snakes can sense sound, but can't hear it. The music has no effect on them at all. The trick is the shape of the instrument. A pungi is a reed instrument, carved from a gourd. The snake, coaxed from its basket, comes out upright as a defensive posture in the face of a perceived threat of the pungi and spreads its hood. The snake moves back and forth in response to the movement of the instrument as the charmer plays it, watching the threat intently.

It is sometimes thought that the snakes are drugged or defanged. While this is sometimes the case, often the snakes are not altered in any way, and it is the expertise of the handler that keeps the snake from harming them.

Snake charming had its heyday in the early and mid-twentieth century and is featured in many films of that era.

## Snake Charming Today

The abundance of nature documentaries on cable stations has removed much of the superstition surrounding snakes. Today, the snake charmer is considered more of a vaudeville or tourist act. But the art of snake charming is in peril. In 1972, a law was passed in India forbidding the ownership of snakes. This was to protect certain species of snakes that were becoming endangered.

The law began to be enforced more rigorously in the twenty-first century, removing the ability of snake charmers, most of whom belong to a semi-nomadic caste, to earn a living. In 2003, snake charmers united in protest to raise attention to their plight. In response, the government has allowed a limited number of snake charmers in specific tourist areas. In addition, they are being trained as snake caretakers and educators.

### Things to talk about:

1. Are king cobras true cobras?

**Answer:** The king cobra, native to India, is not a member of the *Naja* genus to which all other cobras belong. It has its own genus, *Ophiophagus*, which is Greek for “snake eating.” The king cobra feeds almost entirely on other snakes, though it will not pass up a meal of rodents and lizards if hungry.

2. How long can a king cobra live?

**Answer:** They can live for around 20 years.

3. What unusual warning sound does a king cobra make?

**Answer:** It makes a loud hiss that sounds like an angry dog’s growl.

4. Is the king cobra a large snake?

**Answer:** It is the world’s largest venomous snake. It can grow to about 16–18 feet in length and weigh between 20–28 pounds.

5. What are some ways a snake charmer avoids getting bitten?

**Answer:** They know the striking range of the snake and sit just outside it. They train the snake to strike a hard object like the pungi, which when bitten causes pain. The snake learns to avoid striking the pungi and thus the snake charmer. Some snake charmers defang their snakes.

6. Is snake charming an inherited profession?

**Answer:** It was at one time very much a profession passed down from one generation to another, however, snake charming is a dying art because of all of the restrictions currently placed upon it.

7. How safe is it to kiss a cobra on the head?

**Answer:** Cobras can only strike forward and down when in a standing defensive position. That makes a kiss on the head relatively safe, but still not recommended. A man in Malaysia set the record for kissing a cobra on the head 51 times in three minutes.



8. What does the king cobra do that no other snake in the world does when laying its eggs?

**Answer:** It builds a nest of leaves and other debris and deposits its eggs in the nest. It remains with the eggs for the two to three months it takes them to hatch.

9. How deadly is a king cobra's venom?

**Answer:** A bite from a king cobra can lead to death within 30 minutes. It is reported that one bite to an elephant can kill it in a matter of a few hours.

10. What animal will take on a king cobra and usually win?

**Answer:** A mongoose. Other than humans, the mongoose is the cobra's only natural predator. The mongoose is fast and can dodge the strikes of the snake. Though not fully immune, it is tolerant of the cobra's venom because of its acetylcholine receptors. If ever I meet a king cobra, I want a mongoose with me!



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