

Cobra on your plate!

Sounds like a scary thriller movie scene, Indiana Jones, or its analogs! Indeed!

But if I say: no live animal but cooked cobra meat on your plate, fried and may be supercharged with authentic spices or condiments to tickle tastebuds! Whether yucky or yummy, depends on your cultural origin, perhaps! People of certain ethnicities may frown at it, others may drool,so cool!

Whatever be the case, cobra fry, cobra soup, cobra gravy, or cobra satay is in high demand in some parts of the world. So, snake farmers are very happy breeding and selling tonnes and tonnes of snakes across many snake farms, especially in China, Vietnam, and Indonesia.



It is quite true that snake farming has been on the rise in the last decades. The most commonly farmed species are the Chinese cobra (*Naja atra*), the monocled cobra (*Naja kaouthia*), the oriental rat snake (*Ptyas mucosus*), and the majestic king cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*). Certain characteristics allow farmers to make business scalable, e.g., they all mature early, grow rapidly, show high reproductive output, and efficient food assimilation. More importantly, they can be husbanded in small cages, i.e., in a limited space. Hence, these species are ideal candidates for meeting the high market demands through intensive livestock production. Snake farmers look very happy capitalizing on the unique energy-efficient and space-saving farming of snakes to produce ‘sustainable’ meat for human consumption.

But there is a catch and the debate ensues!

Conservationists are concerned. The farms, they say, may foster overexploitation of wild populations of the snakes and create a hole in the legal framework to harvest wild individuals

illegally. Can you refute this claim? We are aware of the fact that they need regular stocking of their viable population with individuals caught from the wild to keep the farmed population healthy and stable over time! Otherwise, low diversity and inbreeding may cause a population crash owing to rapid disease spread, etc. On the contrary, researchers also emphasize that the ease and profitability of snake farming make it a good substitute for catching wild snakes. Possibly, it poses a minimal threat to wild populations.

Currently, snake farming has opened up a unique agricultural opportunity supporting several thousand farmers in rural area. It seems to play a key role in sustainable meat production by saving wild species from overexploitation and doing little harm to the environment.

But what awaits us in the future?

How demand may soon outstrip supply, and tilt the equilibrium? Whether snake farmers switch to industrial-type farming to keep pace with burgeoning demand? Or a new corporate giant gradually turns to this profiteering business?

We don't know really!

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