



NATURE



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THIRTEEN's *Nature* goes to Swaziland to track Africa's deadliest snake in *Black Mamba*, November 8, 2009 on PBS

*Viewers can submit questions for snake handler, Thea Litschka-Koen, at **Nature Online** (pbs.org/nature).*

The black mamba is a snake with a notorious reputation for being fast, furious, and deadly. It can grow to 13 feet and is strong enough to raise a third of its body above the ground and look you in the eye. Its bite is known as the kiss of death – without treatment, the mortality rate is 100 percent.

In the hot, humid climate of Swaziland in Southern Africa, black mambas thrive. They are naturally attracted to the vast sugar cane plantations, but they can also be found in homes, gardens, schools and hotel rooms, sometimes with tragic results. Snake bites in Africa are reaching epidemic proportions, and the traditional response is to kill them before they kill you, or, failing that, to rely on traditional medicine for a cure – always a hopeless option. But two individuals are making an effort to relieve the crisis in Swaziland, and to save both snake and human lives. *Nature* tracks their progress in ***Black Mamba***, premiering Sunday, November 8, 2009 at 8 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Academy Award-winning actor F. Murray Abraham narrates. Viewers can submit questions for snake handler, Thea Litschka-Koen, at ***Nature Online*** (pbs.org/nature).

Nature is a production of THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG – one of America's most prolific and respected public media providers.

Thea Litschka-Koen initially became interested in black mambas after one of her sons chose snakes as a school project. Soon after, she found herself doing a lot of fascinating research and ultimately enrolling in handling and identification courses, and her involvement grew from there. Enlisting her husband, Clifton, in her efforts, Thea began responding to emergency calls from locals, removing and rescuing snakes they found. Each call-out is a daunting proposition, even for this intrepid and experienced couple. After a successful rescue, on-site demonstrations help assuage some of the fears Swazis have about the mambas that will always live among them. Thea also founded a reptile park where some of her rescued snakes could be released and where people could learn more about snakes, as well as how to handle some of them safely.

Locals always wanted to know if the rescued snakes would come back, and that led to a plan. Joining forces with an expert from Johannesburg, the Litschka-Koens began a research project to track rescued black mambas they released into the wild. They hoped to gain new insights that might help them in their work, and to learn the answer to the question the locals wanted more than anything to know. The study was the first of its kind. The mambas were radio-tracked, 24/7, for weeks, and their behavior studied, revealing important information about the snakes.

None of it was learned soon enough to help a local family who lost a daughter to a black mamba's bite after she accidentally stepped on it while playing hide and seek. The traditional healer was unable to help and the local hospital did not have anti-venom to save her.

There is some hope for the future. The Litschka-Koen's work has now been recognized by King Mswati III of Swaziland, who has donated land for a new reserve and for a clinic specializing in the treatment of snake-bites. It will be the first of its kind in Swaziland.

Visit **Nature Online** (pbs.org/nature) to watch previous programs and get updates about the series. Viewers can sound off about issues explored on **Nature**, take polls, and share animal photos with the **Nature** community.

Nature has won more than 450 honors from the television industry, the international wildlife film communities, and environmental organizations – including 10 Emmys, three Peabodys and the first award given to a television program by the Sierra Club. Most recently, the series won a Peabody Award for *Silence of the Bees* and received two Emmy nominations for *Crash: A Tale of Two Species* and *White Falcon, White Wolf*.

Nature's Black Mamba is a production of Tigress Productions Limited and THIRTEEN for WNET.ORG in association with British Broadcasting Corporation. Jo Scofield is producer for Tigress. **Nature** is produced by WNET.ORG for PBS. Fred Kaufman is Executive Producer. William Grant is Executive-in-Charge. Major corporate support for **Nature** is provided by Canon U.S.A., Inc. Additional support is provided by the nation's public television stations.

Nature Online (pbs.org/nature) is the award-winning web companion to the broadcast series and is spearheading **Nature's** distribution to new media platforms. At **Nature Online**, visitors can stream full episodes of **Nature** programs, watch behind-the-scenes video exclusives with filmmakers and producers (also available at iTunes), view program excerpts (also available on YouTube), and find fun interactive content, teacher lesson plans, and more. Join Nature on Facebook (Facebook.com/PBSNature) and follow the series on Twitter (Twitter.com/PBSNature) to keep up with the latest videos, photos, program alerts and more.

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