

Public interactions with adders



The Vanishing Viper: Priorities for Adder Conservation
Cheddar, 8-9 October 2016

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Public interactions with adder: workshop methods

A workshop was run at the 'Vanishing Viper: Priorities for Adder Conservation', meeting at Draycott Memorial Hall, Somerset, on Saturday 8th October 2016 to find out what issues the conference delegates believed to be important in relation to public engagement with adders;

Delegates represented a range of stakeholder groups including: the NGO sector, statutory bodies, land managers, ecological consultants, academic institutions, and enthusiastic volunteers from the amphibian and reptile groups. As a result delegates based their opinions on widely differing experiences, and this may have resulted in a broader spread of responses, rather than if just one stakeholder group had been consulted;

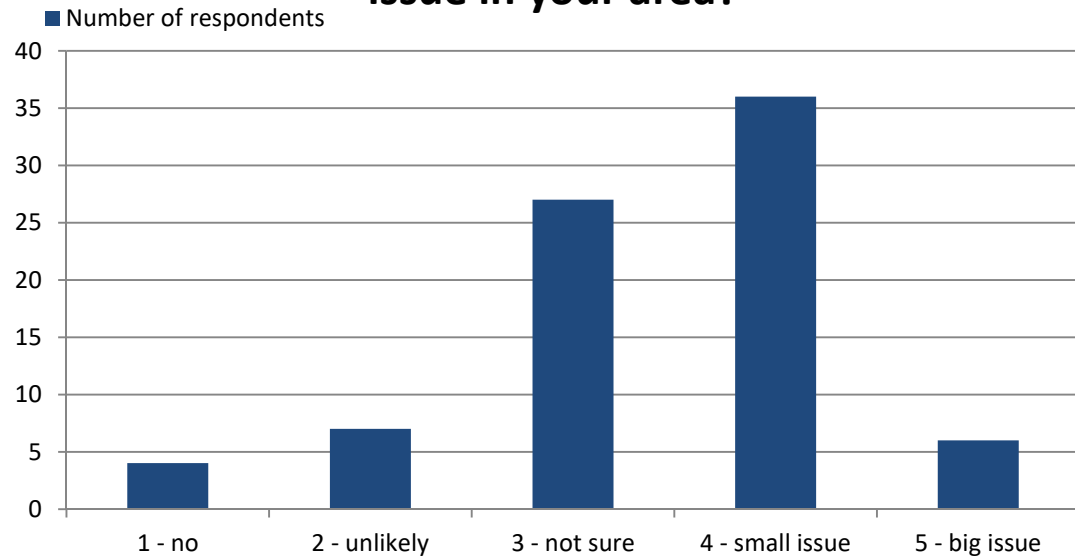
The delegates were offered a PowerPoint presentation to illustrate the issues, and then posed a series of questions, each relating to a different aspect of human-adder interactions. They were then asked either to assess the importance of these factors, or to suggest a mechanism or strategy to address the issue. Comments were also invited to qualify the rankings given;

Responses were hand-written on paper answer sheets during the workshop. A total of 83 people responded, but not every delegate responded to every question. Delegates were entitled to remain anonymous if they wished. These responses have been summarised and are presented in this paper.



79% of respondents believed that disturbance from photography was either a small issue, or weren't sure.

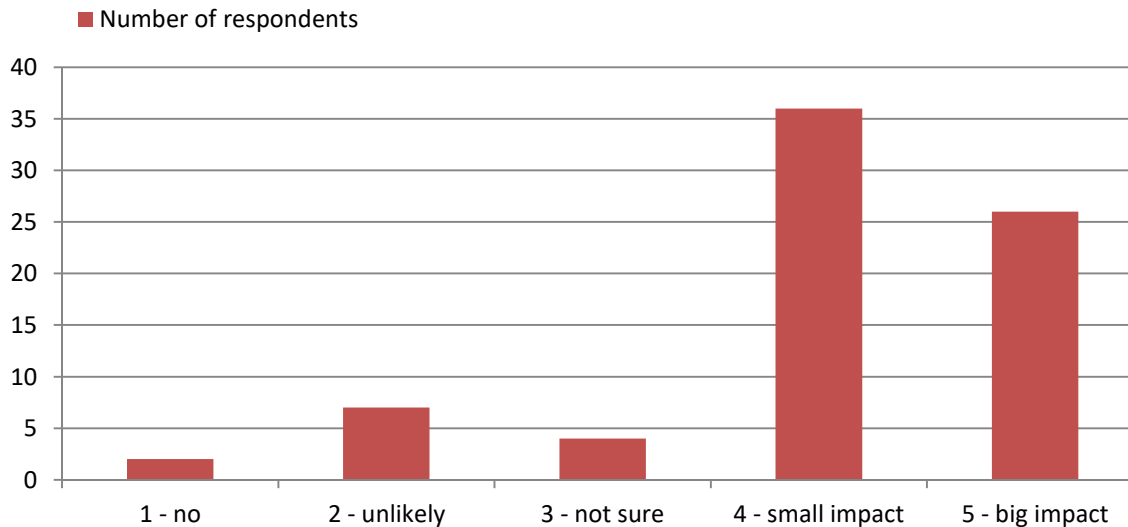
Q 1: Is disturbance from photographers an issue in your area?



- 33.75% of respondents were 'not sure'. Respondents commented that, although many of them had not experienced this phenomenon at first hand, they had heard of it, but were unable to judge how widespread the problem was.
- Only 7.5% of respondents thought it was a big problem. These tended to be from specific areas including: Somerset, Derbyshire and Surrey, where disturbance is a major issue at some well-known sites. 45% of respondents rated it a small issue as only confined to a few sites.
- In recent years fears have been expressed about sharing of adder sites, particularly through social or other public media. It was noted that whilst many wildlife photographers do act responsibly, adders are seen as a trophy species by some individuals.



Q 2: Do you think consistent disturbance at a local/site level could have a negative impact on the long term conservation of adders?



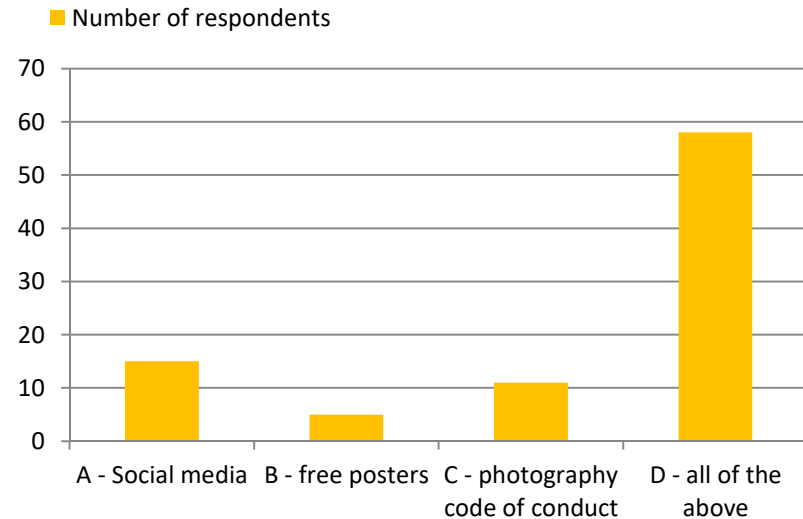
83% of respondents believed that consistent disturbance could have an impact on the long term conservation of adders.

- Some respondents thought that any disturbance would be very stressful for the animals.
- Many respondents said that the long term impact would depend on the type and frequency of disturbance i.e. dogs, photographers. If infrequent then there would be a correspondingly lower impact.
- Some thought that impact could vary depending on season (spring most critical), the habitat type, e.g. amount and connectivity of vegetation cover, and the size of the adder population.
- Some respondents wanted to have a better evidence base before they could make a decision.
- Two respondents thought that human disturbance might be beneficial as would reduce the impact of bird predation.
- A few respondents thought that occasional disturbance is worthwhile to gather data or photographs that could be used to inspire adder conservation.



65% of respondents said that a mixture of approaches including: messaging via social media; posters; and a photographers' code of conduct were required to reduce the problems of disturbance by photographers

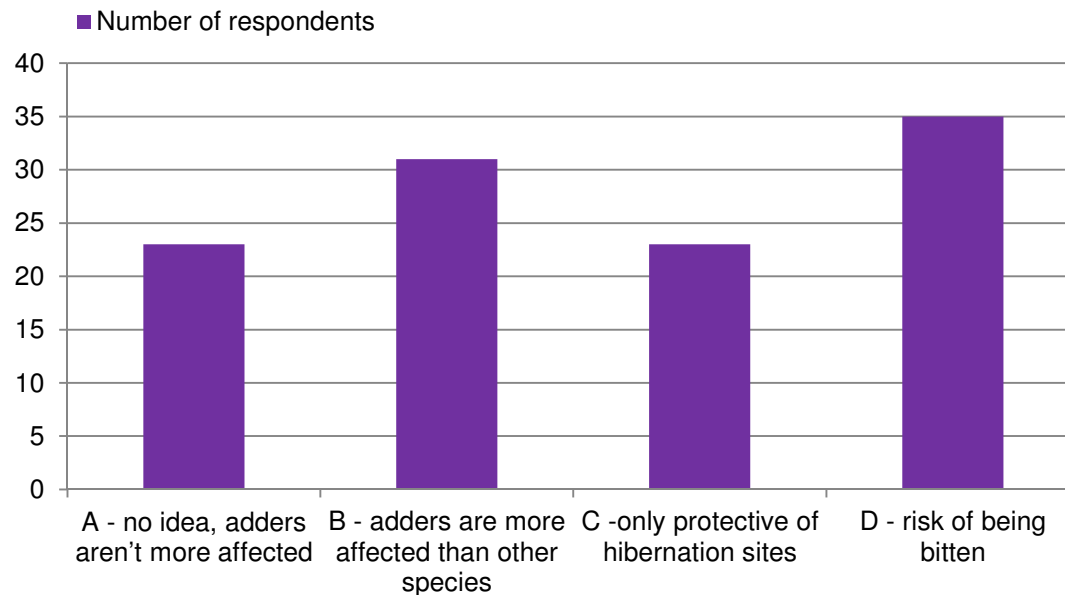
Q 3: How should we raise awareness to help reduce the issue of photographers disturbing adders?



- Many respondents believed that a 'code of conduct' was a good idea, but were unsure how it could be enforced, ideas for the code could include distance from the animal, time spent at one spot, etc.
- Some said that we as a community should avoid praising photos where the animal was clearly disturbed, and encourage photo agencies/media platforms to ask where images are sourced from.
- Some respondents thought that the approach should vary by audience; established wildlife photographers are far more aware, and would require different messages to enthusiastic amateurs who are more likely to get carried away in the moment.
- Some people thought it needed a change of culture so that it is more widely understood that photographing wild animals is a privilege rather than a right.
- Another comment was that if sensitive site details weren't shared then photographers wouldn't find them.



Q 4: Why are many herpetologists so protective over adder handling /disturbance compared with other reptile species?

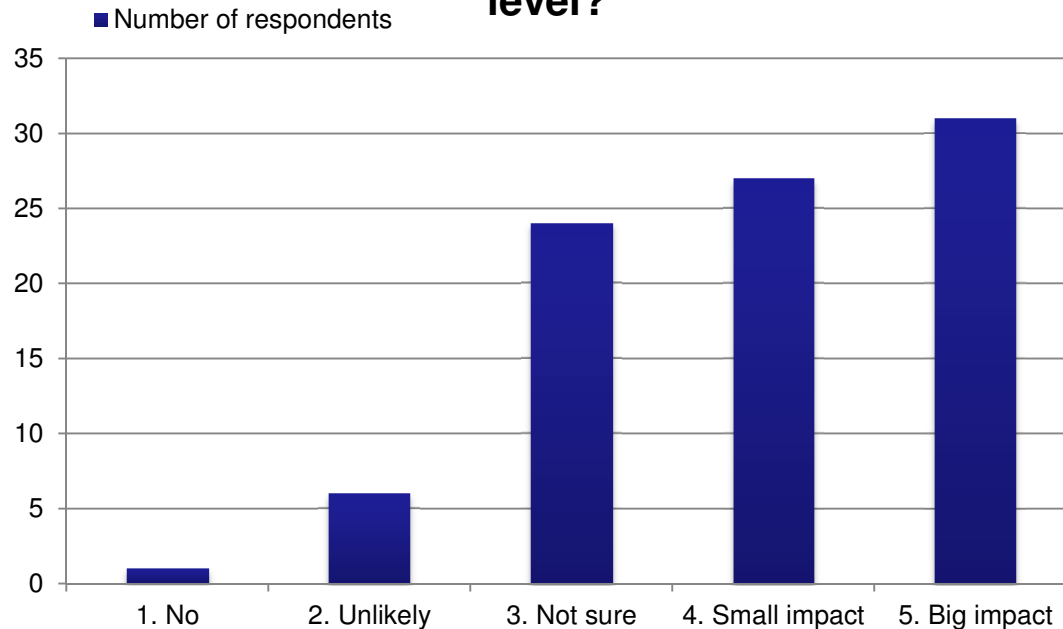


There was no consistent answer to this question; 31% believed that it was the risk of being bitten.

- 20.5% of our respondents didn't believe that adders were more affected than other species such as grass snake, smooth snake or common lizard.
- Many people checked more than one box – 15 people ticked B + D, as they thought that adders were more affected than other species, but also there is a great risk of being bitten.
- 20.5% believed that hibernation sites are the main point of vulnerability, since they provide a focus for the animals making them easy to find, as well as the animal being more vulnerable to disturbance at this time of the year, so the important thing is to avoid these features.



Q 5 Could handling adders be detrimental for their long term conservation at a site level?



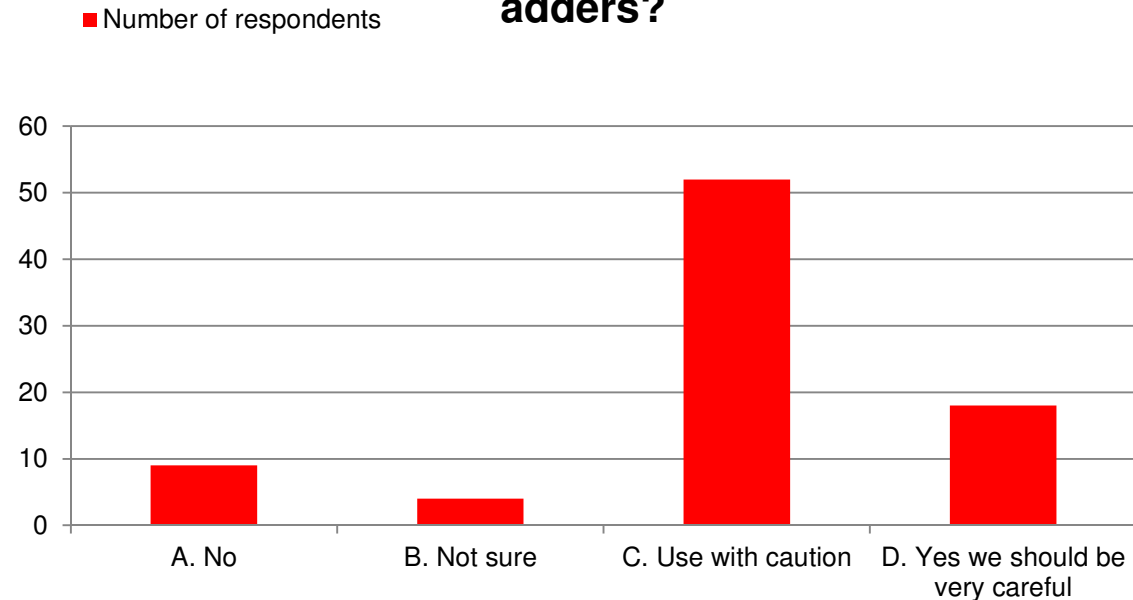
There was no consistent answer to this one; where people were not sure it was because they felt unable to prioritise, though the majority agreed that excessive handling is not a good idea

- 27% of respondents were not sure about the impact of handling on long term conservation. Some of the reasons given are that they weren't sure how handling ranked alongside other factors such as habitat loss. Impact was also felt to be dependent on the nature of the site; the size of the adder population; who was doing the handling; and how often.
- 30% of respondents were in the 'small impact' group, and also highlighted the importance of the circumstances, i.e. how many animals, how often, who handles them; but were keen to highlight the need for some handling by trained experts for scientific purposes, or on some occasions for educational purposes.
- 35% of respondents that said there was a big impact. Many also often qualified the comment by suggesting that the sensitivity of the site and the frequency and length of handling be factored in.



Q 6: Bat groups use radio tagging for roosts, and citizen science. Should we be careful about following this route with adders?

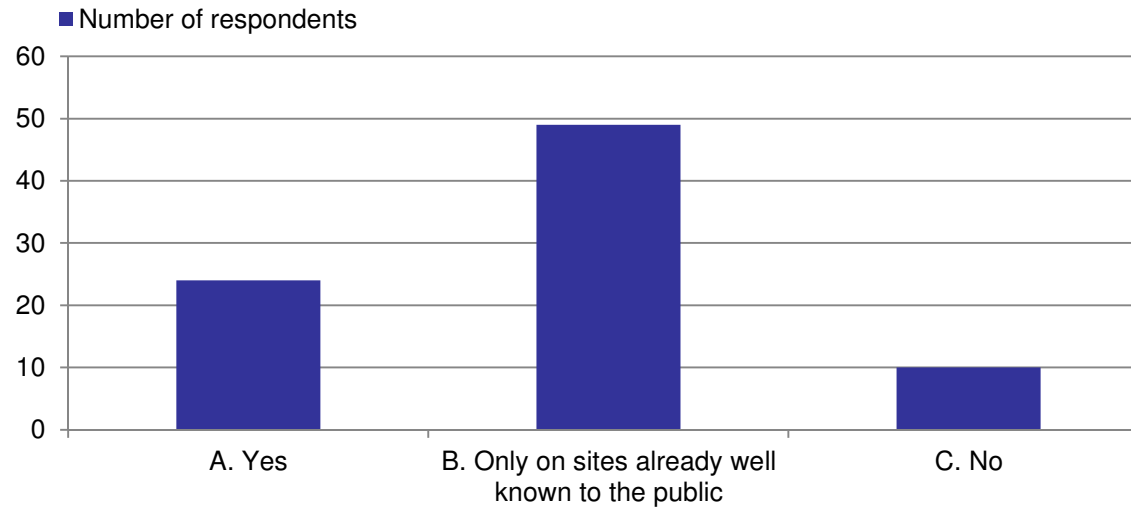
Most respondents believed that it was a good idea to use radio tagging, but over 60% proposed using it with caution



- Some respondents commented that there would need to be a clear justification to use radio tagging.
- 62% of respondents said 'use with caution'. Many explained they were happy for the technique to be used as long as animals were handled sensitively, and those doing so were trained particularly as these are venomous snakes.
- Some respondents thought this technique could be managed by licensing, or by the radio taggers attending an accredited course.
- There was a suggestion that, although the data gathered is very useful particularly to find out more about populations, it should be used sparingly as is very expensive.
- Some respondents thought it could be useful for citizen science, as an opportunity to engage the wider community and provide specialist training.



Q 7: Should factual (positive?) interpretation about adders be available at sites?



Most respondents thought that factual information should be made available at adder sites, but 59% thought this should be confined to well known sites

- Many respondents thought that signage could have a useful role in raising awareness and creating a positive attitude.
- Positive signage would have interpretive materials rather than warnings, and use visual images wherever possible
- Conversely, others thought that signage could encourage disturbance or people thinking they had been bitten when they hadn't.
- Most people said that it was a good idea to have interpretation at sites where there were a lot of dog walkers; to discourage people from letting their dogs loose, and reinforce more responsible behaviour.
- Many respondents said that more obscure sites should not require signage.



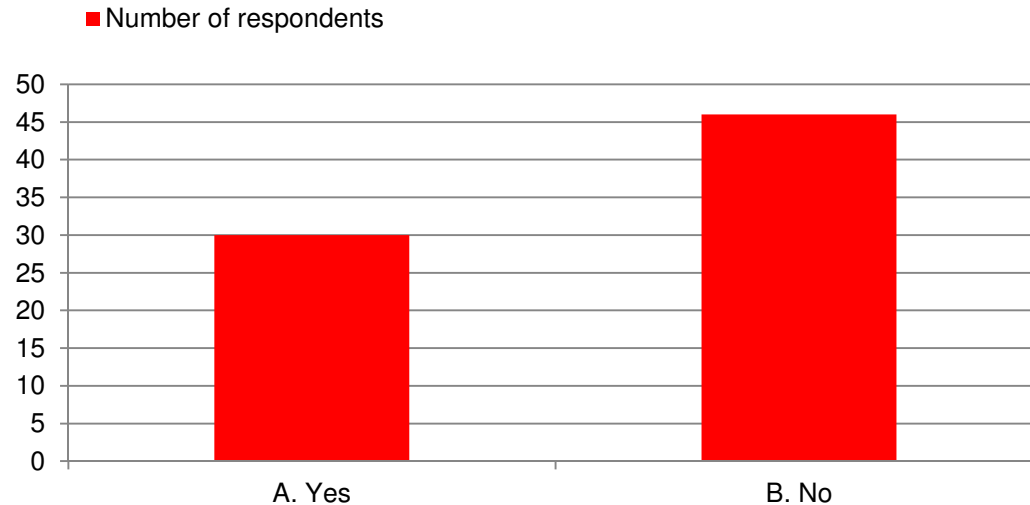
Q 8 How can we deal with the media and adder bites: of people and dogs

- A more rapid response to press articles to correct misconceptions and refute sensationalist copy.
- Develop a consistent, factually correct and positive message in advance of incidents, that can be given to the media if required.
- Need to stress that adders are not dangerous animals unless they are interfered with.
- Regularly put out positive press stories about adders (and other herpetofauna).
- Provide advice about how to treat adder bites at adder sites, leaflets in veterinary surgeries, and hospitals that are near to well known adder sites.
- Flood the media with positive messages.
- Release press releases to the media at the beginning of the season, to pre-empt sensational news stories, pay google to get positive adder stories at the top of the search ratings.



Q 9: Are we playing down the severity of adder bites?

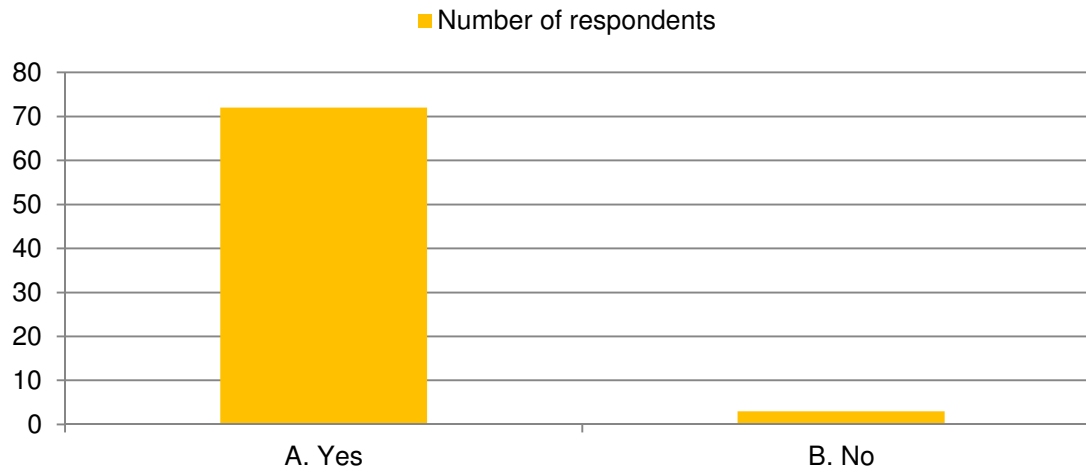
60% of respondents did not think that we are playing down the severity of adder bites, against 40% that think we are.



- Respondents thought that some adder bite symptoms were mis-diagnosed, and had another causation e.g. a bee sting.
- More information about adder bites, the effects of being bitten, and how best to respond if you are bitten, should be made available, but weighed against this there should be factual information about the number of deaths and high proportion of recoveries.
- There is a lot we still don't understand about variation in venom and toxicity.
- Perhaps the herping community does over-react, but this could be a knee jerk reaction to the disproportionate and sensational coverage that adder bites usually receive in the press.
- Some adder workers handle the animals so often they may become complacent.
- Dog owners should be made more aware.
- Concern that if we highlight the danger of adder bites there will be more persecution.



Q 10. Should there be a dedicated web page with all the adder bite facts (or links to the best resources)



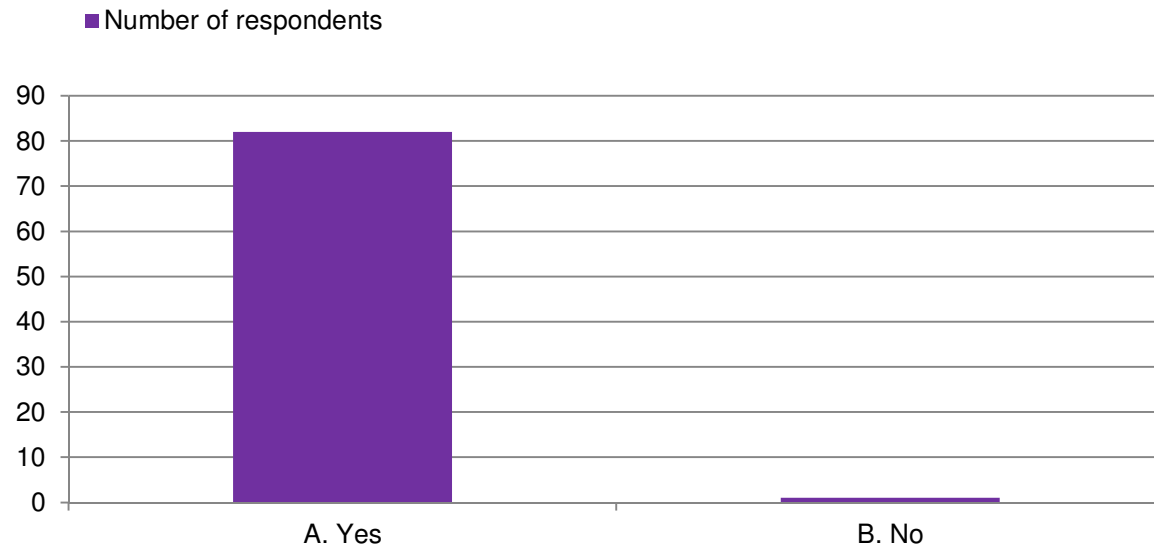
96% of respondents thought there ought to be a dedicated web page concerning adder bite facts

- Respondents were generally enthusiastic about the idea of a single web-page bringing together all the facts about adder bites, and how to treat them. This could then be linked with hospitals and veterinary surgeries.
- A few expressed concerns that an information source must be accurate and up to date, and queried who would take responsibility for this.
- A few respondents thought the adder page should be linked with existing information about adders on the ARC or ARG UK web-sites.
- One respondent suggested we title it 'Don't Panic'!



Q 11: Should we be trying harder to educate veterinary practices and dog owners?

99% of respondents thought we should be trying harder to educate veterinary practices and dog owners.



- Most respondents thought this was important because dogs presenting with similar symptoms are often reported but in some cases we believe that the dog was not bitten by an adder – perhaps a thorn or bee sting.
- Some dog owners have reacted angrily to stories of dogs being bitten, with calls for adders to be controlled.
- Positive information e.g. in the form of interpretive boards, could counteract the fear culture that exists in dog walking communities in some places, and dog owners could be advised to keep their animals under control or on leads if there is a risk of being bitten.
- Some respondents thought we could provide a leaflet and web-based information for veterinarians and dog owners, in surgeries.

One respondent did not feel this to be an issue as many vets are very well informed, particularly if they are based near adder sites.



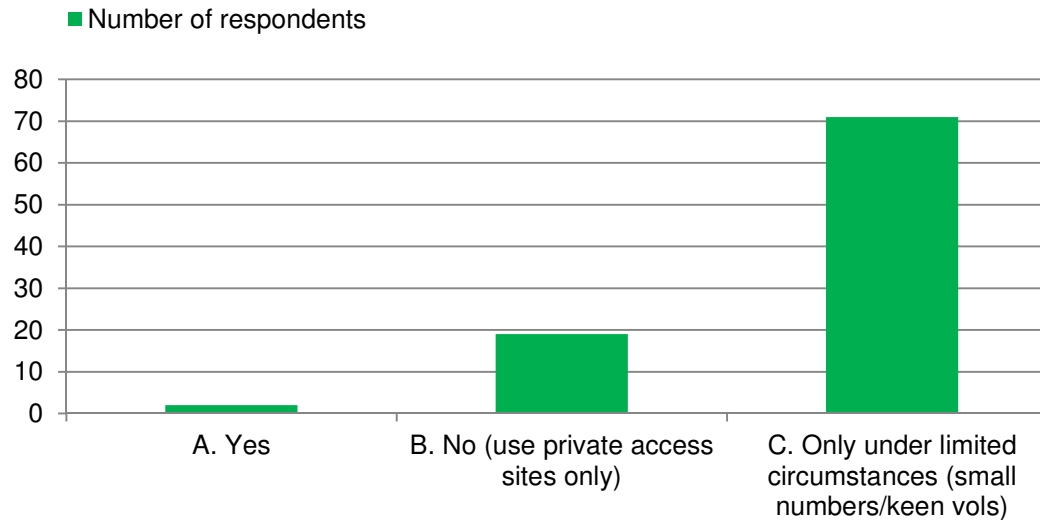
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Q 12: How can we encourage increased recording without increasing disturbance?

- Some respondents asked whether recording necessarily resulted in disturbance.
- Many respondents believed that longer term training and long term mentoring would help engender more responsible behaviour, rather than relying on a short, one or half day courses/trainings.
- Volunteer selection was also said to be important, getting to know volunteers better by working with small groups and mentoring to pass on ethical and responsible behaviours would help with this process.
- It is also helpful to find out more about the motivation of individuals before sharing sensitive site locations.
- Some respondents thought that having an accredited training course with agreed protocols and standards would help. One example given was SARG where they monitor visits to ensure that each site is only visited once per month. One respondent suggested that a named individual be given responsibility for monitoring each site and its volunteers.
- A lot of respondents had ideas for encouraging ethical, respectful and thoughtful survey practices, for example: by discouraging handling or other physical interventions; training people on open sites rather than over-reliance on refuges; use of binoculars; creating simple and clear recording protocols to minimise the time spent with the animals; run practice exercises; teach people by working with other species first; and to emphasise the importance of not disturbing the animal and explain why.
- Incorporate this advice into the photographers' 'code of conduct' guidelines.



Q 13: Should guided walks / training on open access sites involve adder hibernacula?



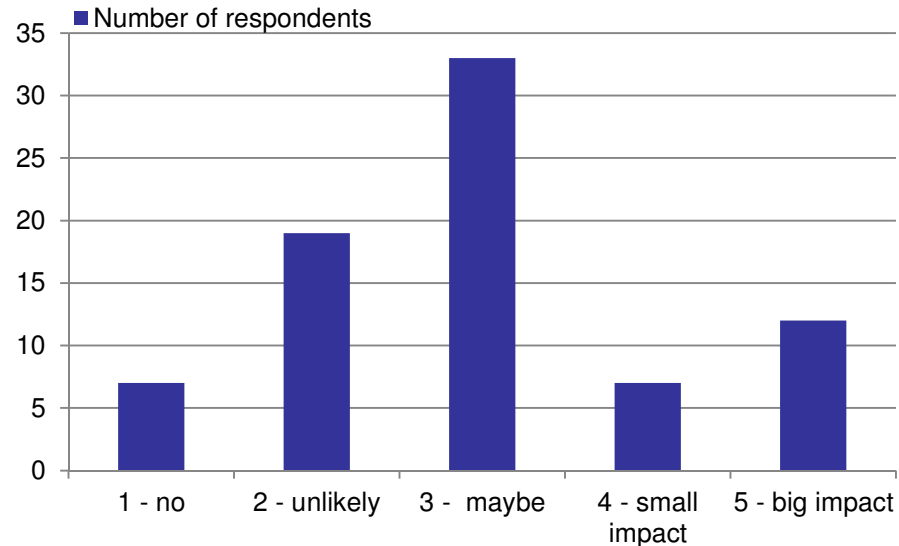
98% of respondents thought that some level of control of access to hibernacula ought to be implemented

- 20% of respondents believed that guided walks to adder hibernacula should not be undertaken on public sites, and that only private sites with controlled access should be visited in this way.
- 77% of respondents thought that it should be possible to visit hibernacula on publically accessible sites, but that only trusted volunteers in small groups should be taken to hibernacula, as animals lying out basking early in the season are so sensitive to disturbance.
- Some respondents commented that there should be a legitimate conservation purpose to justify visiting hibernacula.
- Nobody thought that the general public should be routinely taken to adder hibernacula, as there is no way of preventing people from returning, or publicising sites to their friends or more widely through social media.
- A few people did not think that there is a problem with sharing hibernacula locations, but this was qualified as for training only or controlled in some other way (not for general reptile walks).



Q 14: Could public interactions with adders be having an effect on their conservation at national level

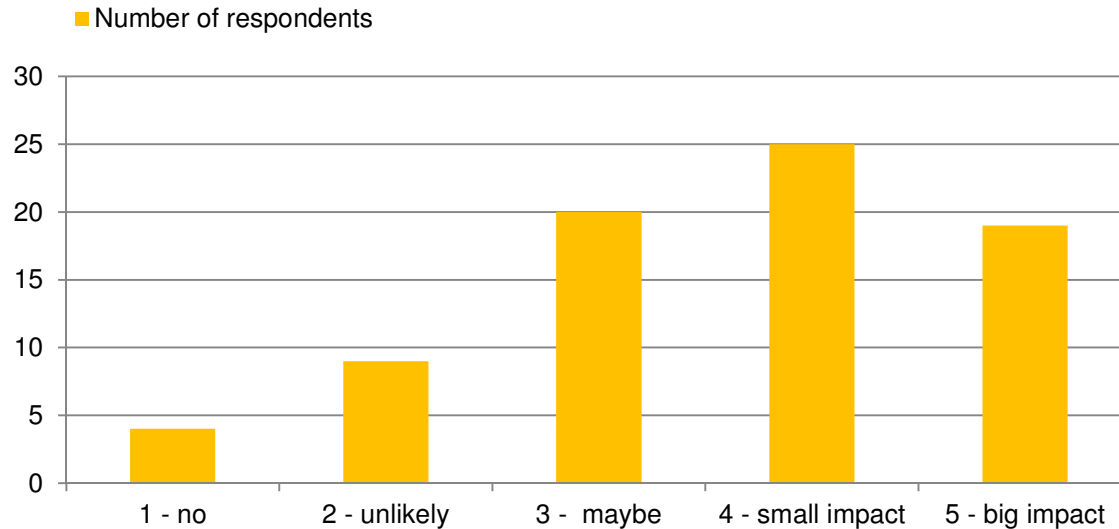
There was no consistent view on this question. Most respondents were unsure or thought it unlikely that public interactions were having an impact at national level



- 33% of respondents thought that public interactions had no, or were unlikely to have an impact on adder conservation at the national level. The reasons given for this were that other factors such as loss of habitat or poor habitat management are of greater importance. Respondents also commented that very few of the wider public had ever encountered an adder, much less handled or disturbed one.
- Some respondents commented that there was greater persecution in past times, when adders were more common and came into contact with the public more often.
- 42% of respondents thought it unlikely, again citing the greater importance of other factors such as habitat loss
- 24% of respondents believed that public interactions are having a big impact nationally, mainly by land-owner persecution, which is exacerbated because there are so few highly populated sites left.



Q 15: Could public interactions with adders be having an effect on their conservation at the local level



There was a divergence of opinion on this, but more people believed that public interactions could have a small or big impact at the local level, than at the national level.

- 16% of respondents thought that public interactions had no, or were unlikely to have an, impact on adder conservation at the local level. The reasons given for this were that the greatest disturbance was at a minority of sites.
- 26% of respondents were not sure, or had no personal experience of this.
- 32.5% of respondents said that it was a problem at particular sites that are: well known; have a high public footprint; are very accessible; or have small or isolated populations, but not at all sites.
- 24.5% of respondents believed that this could be a major problem, if for example, there was a very unsympathetic landowner; or there were high levels of continuous disturbance at important adder sites, then this could have a very large impact on local populations.

