

## EDITORIAL NOTE

### Comments on the retraction of an article by Faiz et al. (2017) on the putative occurrence of a King Cobra, *Ophiophagus hannah* (Cantor, 1836), in Pakistan

Hinrich Kaiser<sup>1</sup>

The primary currency of science is trust, built upon a foundation of verifiable data and methodological rigor. As an open-access journal, *Herpetology Notes* is committed to the rapid dissemination of robust herpetological research. While we take pride in a strong, high-quality publication record backed by the expertise of an Editorial Team with global reach and confident, competent peer-review, this process necessarily relies heavily on the integrity of authors. While our editorial and review systems are designed to assess scientific merit, they cannot always detect deliberate misrepresentation before publication, as evidenced by the infamous case of the vaccine-autism connection (The Editors of *The Lancet*, 2010). I here detail a case where the trust between authors and our editorial system was violated, leading to the retraction of a published article. This retraction was done with all due haste, but as an open-access, online journal, articles can spread through the scientific community very quickly. Recent developments and the prominence of the focal species necessitate a more formal explanation of the issues leading to retraction with the aim to prevent the further propagation of an erroneous record in the scientific literature.

The short note by Faiz et al. (2017) purported to document the first confirmed sighting of a King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) from the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Territory, a region administered by Pakistan. The manuscript passed through our standard peer-review

process, during which both a reviewer and the handling Associate Editor evaluated the work on the basis of the information presented by the authors. Specifically, the authors presented a photograph of a king cobra on the edge of a road alongside a satellite map with a pin to identify the locality. Date and time of the encounter were also included (15 May 2017 at 11:10 h). The manuscript appeared to be straightforward in terms of the observation, it required only minor editorial corrections, and it could be published quickly. As is our practice, the paper was converted to journal format, the authors approved the proofs, and it was posted online on 30 June 2017 to make the finding available to the scientific community.

#### Chronology of Concerns

Less than a month after publication, concerns were raised by three readers of *Herpetology Notes* with an interest in Asian snakes, each a prominent member of the herpetological community and well-versed in the process leading to publication. Independently, they questioned the authenticity of the single photo the authors had presented as evidence, and each stated that this image was somehow familiar to them – but from other, non-Pakistani sources. These concerns led me to initiate an internal investigation, which revealed several critical problems.

I first noted that the authors had not made some of the required corrections on the proofs, in particular the misspelling of the genus name in the figure caption as “*Phiophagus*.” Furthermore, I realised that a key historical reference on the region’s herpetofauna, Malcolm Smith’s *The Fauna of British India, Ceylon and Burma, Reptilia and Amphibia – Vol. III: Serpentes* (Smith, 1943), was not cited. On p. 438 in this volume, Smith explicitly records a king cobra from “near Lahore in the Punjab,” a region then part of British India and now part of modern-day Pakistan. This record was

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<sup>1</sup> Sektion Herpetologie, Leibniz-Institut zur Analyse des Biodiversitätswandels, Museum Koenig, Adenauerallee 127, 53113 Bonn, Germany; and Department of Biology, Victor Valley College, 18422 Bear Valley Road, Victorville, California 92395, USA. E-mail: hinrich.kaiser@vvc.edu

subsequently cited by Daniel (1983) in support of the presence of *O. hannah* in Pakistan. While Lahore is indeed a city in present-day Pakistan, “near Lahore” is an imprecise locality. Since Lahore is very close to the border between Pakistan and India as it exists today (ca. 24 km minimum distance), “near Lahore” might include parts of what today is Indian territory. Furthermore, king cobras are restricted to forests in the Himalayan foothills throughout northern India, and a natural occurrence in the plains around Lahore seems highly unlikely. It cannot be discounted that the snake mentioned by Smith was brought from the hills to Lahore by a snake charmer or animal trader. Thus, I would argue that only a new, vouchered confirmation of *O. hannah* from anywhere in Pakistan should be considered the first record.

Therefore, if the photographic record by Faiz et al. (2017) were valid, it would have indeed constituted a first record for Pakistan and the first for the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Territory. These minor historical issues should at least have been identified during the review process and resulted in a discussion of putative Pakistan localities for king cobras, but neither reviewers nor Associate Editor had sufficient familiarity with king cobras at the western edge of their range.

The more serious issue pertained to the photograph the authors presented as evidence. A reverse-image search using the original digital image revealed that the same image had been circulated online prior to the publication of this paper on multiple platforms (e.g., on Facebook – 10 June 2017; Lhendup, 2017). Crucially, in one of these instances, the Chinese news outlet KKNews had published the image on 13 May 2017, two days before the date (15 May 2017) the authors claimed to have encountered and photographed the snake. This temporal incongruity cast immediate doubt on the authenticity of the record.

Considering a timeline mix-up and the possibility that the authors had received the image from a third party known to them, whose identity had inadvertently been omitted from their acknowledgments and who had shopped this photograph to the media, I contacted the first author with a request to explain the discrepancy. In his response, Dr. Faiz stated (verbatim):

"i has not marked as copy right so I am feeling problem. i have received mail and was told as rope but not snake. The problem is that herpetologist of our area neither himself work in this remote area and nor accept work of others. I have also discovered another species of Himalayan wolf species in the area. Any way I am working more in the area and I will give you full length article on king cobra."

This response appears to make it clear that the photograph, contrary to the assertion in the paper, was not taken by the authors. Moreover, it emerged that none of the author team could verify the provenance of the image or the circumstances under which it was taken, fundamentally undermining the paper's core claim.

## Retraction

After discussing the issue with members of the *Herpetology Notes* Editorial Team and outlining the evidence, we agreed that the paper in its current version could not stand because the information it contained was false. Specifically, the authors had misrepresented how they came into possession of the photograph and made up a timeline to suit their report. Having completed our own due diligence and providing the authors with several opportunities to provide relevant and exonerating information, a final decision needed to be reached. Thus, on 13 October 2017, 105 days after publication, I informed the authors that the Editorial Team of *Herpetology Notes* had concluded that the information they had presented in their article was demonstrably false, that they had not provided any mitigating information, and that the paper had been retracted unilaterally to preserve the journal's integrity.

In the aftermath of the retraction, I received no further news regarding the putative record of king cobras in Pakistan, until the third author of the Faiz et al. paper inquired in January 2025 about what had happened to the paper he co-authored. It appears that the first author, with whom I communicated, neglected to inform his co-authors about the paper's retraction. During the same month, a Pakistani colleague inquired about the status of the paper, which he had found on several websites (Zenodo, ResearchGate, Academia) but not in the *Herpetology Notes* archives.

## Propagation of the Erroneous Record and Taxonomic Implication

Despite the retraction, the Faiz et al. (2017) record has been cited in at least five subsequent articles. These have included a monograph on reptiles in Indochina (Poyarkov et al., 2023), the supplement to Snakes of the World (Boundy, 2020), a paper on the wolfsnake *Lycodon bicolor* (as *L. mackinnoni*; Lal et al., 2019), and a report of *O. hannah* nesting in Bhutan (Koirala and Tshering, 2021). Most notably, it was referenced in the significant taxonomic revision of *Ophiophagus hannah* by Das et al. (2024). This revision, which split

*O. hannah* into four distinct species, cited the retracted Pakistan record to support the distribution of *O. hannah sensu stricto*, in whose range the authors included eastern Pakistan. The citation of a retracted and invalid record introduces a significant error into this otherwise foundational taxonomic work, potentially misleading future ecological, biogeographic, and conservation studies that rely on its conclusions. It is therefore imperative to state unequivocally that the record from Bagh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan (Faiz et al., 2017) is invalid and should not be used for any scientific purpose.

### Conclusion and Call to Action

One of the first conclusions to be drawn is that the publication of an open-access scientific paper can lead to rapid and lasting dissemination and even a retraction after 105 days may not have the desired effect. While on the editorial side, the Editorial Team and I were trying to quickly contain an embarrassing failure of a system that had worked well for over a decade, we should not have removed the published paper from the *Herpetology Notes* archives without explanation or a paper trail but instead retained it and labelled it as a retracted paper. We have now reinstated the paper to its original volume so that there is no longer a gap in page numbers, and we have added a suitable warning to the paper's display on the site and to the paper itself. I hope that indexing agencies will pick this up, while I also intend to send copies of the offending paper along with this explanation to several outlets.

This case highlights the challenges scientific publishing faces in an era of digital imagery and rapid information sharing. It underscores the responsibility of authors to provide accurate and verifiable data and the duty of the scientific community to remain vigilant. It goes beyond the normal editorial process that Associate Editors or reviewers conduct reverse image searches to ascertain that an image is free from controversy. Even if an image cannot be found online, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence (as popularised by Carl Sagan), so a search would not be an efficient tool to root out deception. Alas, in a day and age where science is not only threatened by dishonesty but by plagiarism and taxonomic vandalism (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2013; Denzer et al., 2016), it is ultimately a community effort to keep unscientific information out of the scientific mainstream (Wüster et al., 2021). Thus, retractions (and their publicization!) are key to preserving scientific integrity (Joshi and Minirani, 2024).

The Editorial Team of *Herpetology Notes* reiterates its commitment to safeguarding the scientific record and adding corrective measures as appropriate. We also urge authors, reviewers, and editors to remain vigilant, to check for retractions, to exercise caution with single-source evidence, especially in distributional records, and to utilise available tools, such as reverse-image searches, should doubts creep in. We also call upon the authors of the 2024 taxonomic revision, and any other authors who have cited Faiz et al. (2017), to consider publishing a correction acknowledging that the Pakistan record is erroneous and should be disregarded. Only through proactive and collective effort can we maintain the accuracy and integrity of our shared scientific knowledge base.

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