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Sci. & Tech.

Female rattlesnakes 'indulge in cannibalism'

Washington (PTI): Researchers have for the first time found evidence that cannibalism is widespread among female rattlesnakes as it helps the species to recover as well as regain strength after giving birth.

A new study has shown that female rattlesnakes ingest on average 11 per cent of their postpartum mass (in particular eggs and dead offspring) in an attempt to recover energy for subsequent reproduction.

According to the researchers, cannibalism is "not an aberrant behaviour, and is not an attack on the progeny", it simply recovers some of what the female snake invested in the reproduction process, and prepares it to reproduce once again.

"A cannibal rattlesnake female can recover lost energy for reproduction without having to hunt for food, a dangerous activity that requires time and expends a great deal energy," lead author Estrella Mocino of University of Granada said.

The researchers came to the conclusion after measuring "cannibalistic behaviour" among 190 females which had some 239 clutches of eggs. They found that this phenomenon is justified by "enabling the mother to recover and regain strength".

Of all the females, 68 per cent consumed part or all of their dead offspring, and 83 per cent of these ate them all, and waited little time to do so, although some ate them "immediately after giving birth". The rest 40 per cent of the females "did not display cannibalistic behaviour".

The study has found that cannibalism in this species is an evolutionary result of its feeding behaviour, since its prey is dead for some time before being eaten by the snake.

"Viperids in general are prepared to eat carrion, and for this reason it is not so strange that they consume the non-viable sections of their clutches after going through the great energy expenditure caused by reproduction.

"In comparison with mammals or birds, snakes aren't as maternal, but the study shows that they also display behaviour that has evolved, and that helps the female and her offspring to reproduce and grow successfully," Mocino said.

The study has been published in the latest edition of the *Animal Behaviour* journal.

Sci. & Tech.

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