Basic Care for Boa/Python Snakes

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This handout is intended to offer information on the care, feeding and handling of large snakes. There are many similarities in this regard but the following discussion describes their differences.

Boa Constrictor

Boa constrictor, also called the "common boa" is a non-venomous Boa species. They can be found in Central and South America, and on some Caribbean islands. Size varies depending on the subspecies but large adults can reach 13-14ft.

Boas can grasp objects with their tails. Young individuals may climb into trees and shrubs to forage but most adults become terrestrial as they age and become heavier. Females give birth to live young that can be 15-20 inches in length at birth. In captivity they can live 20-30 years.

The best place to obtain a boa constrictor is from a professional breeder, one who has been breeding boas for years and does this work full time. It is not recommended to purchase wild caught boas as they generally have more health problems. Captive bred boas generally come in a wide variety of colors and patterns.

Pythons

There are many species of the genus Python but the Ball Python (also known as the Royal Python) is the most common and popular in the pet trade due to its relatively smaller size and quiet temperament. It is found in the wild in sub-Saharan Africa and is a non-venomous constrictor. The name "ball python " refers to its tendency to curl into a ball when frightened. Females (4-4.5 ft) tend to be slightly larger than males (3-3.5ft). Some Ball Pythons have lived 40 years in captivity. They are ground dwellers that prefer burrows and other underground hiding places. Females lay 3-11 eggs under ground which hatch in 55-60 days.

Boa and Python Habitat

The cage options of all-glass terrariums, plastic cages, rack systems, or homemade cages are available to house these snakes. In general if your adult snake is 10 ft long, the cage should be 5' X 5' or 6' X 4'. A 12 ft long snake should have a cage that is 8' x 4'. Boas tend to climb so cage height should be 4-5' high. The substrate, or the material that lines the bottom of the cage, can be composed of several acceptable options, all of which have pros and cons.

1. Newspaper- cheap, easy to obtain and replace but not visually appealing.
2. Aspen shavings- visually appealing, readily available, but can be dusty and harder to clean than newspaper.
3. Carefresh bedding- Readily available, resistant to mold, heat treated for cleanliness, but is expensive and harder to clean than newspaper.
4. Cyprus mulch- Readily available, helps increase relative humidity if needed, but harder to clean than newspaper and requires more frequent cleaning and maintenance.
5. Dri-dek rubber mats- Easy to clean, resistant to mold and bacteria, but expensive.

Heat--Snakes need an external heat source. In nature they bask in the sun to warm themselves. In captivity, we must provide an additional heat source. It is recommended to have a temperature gradient with a cool area of the cage at 70-75F and a basking area that is warmer at 85-92F. This allows the snake to thermoregulate, moving to one side of the cage or the other as needed. Options for setting up heat sources include the following and should be used in your snake's cage:

1. Heat lamps- Lamps that have either incandescent (white light) bulbs or infrared(red light) bulbs are mounted on the top of the cage and radiate downward.

2. Under-the-tank-heating pads- These pads have an adhesive back that is adhered to the bottom of the cage and radiates heat upward.
3. Be sure to have thermometers inside the cage at ground level to monitor the temperature.

For lighting --There are no special lighting requirements other than the basic light cycle of day and night which can be provided with a basic fluorescent light put on a timer.

For humidity--The relative humidity in the environment helps keep snakes hydrated and shed their skin. Snakes shed through out their lives and if the humidity in the environment is inadequate they will have incomplete shedding. The Boa constrictor's ideal humidity should be about 60% and the Ball python in the 50%-60% range. Additional moisture can be provided when ever the snake enters a shed cycle by misting the cage substrate twice daily or providing a "moisture box". Placing a water bowl in the cage to provide fresh drinking water at all times will also help keep your snake hydrated. Water in a container deep enough for the snake to soak can also aid in shedding. A well-hydrated snake should shed their skin in one or two long pieces. If the environment is too dry, the shed will come off in multiple pieces and/or parts which can be retained and build up over time such as areas of skin over the eyes "eye cap". If this occurs your snake will need assistance from your veterinarian.

Hiding areas--Hiding areas in the cage provide a place your snake can retreat to feel safe and reduce stress. There should be one in both the cool and warm areas of the cage. The hiding area should be small enough that the snake feels the sides of the container (snug) and is completely enclosed except for the entrance hole. A cardboard box, plastic storage container, or half log can be used.

Feeding Boas and Pythons--These snakes can eat mice, rats, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, and rabbits. Young snakes should be offered one food item of appropriate size every 5-7 days. Adult snakes can be offered a meal every 7-10 days. The size of the food should be no wider than largest part of the snake's body. Juvenile snakes often eat "pinkies" which are baby rats and mice. They come frozen and you thaw them before feeding. Snakes can become obese just like other animals if they are fed too frequently or meals that are too large. We recommend feeding your snake in a feeding cage separate from the snake's normal habitat. This will prevent your snake from striking in its normal cage. A large tupperware container or small tote usually works well.

How to feed your snake? The best way is to offer frozen rodents that have been thawed and warmed. The freezing process kills any parasites the rodent may have, they cannot injure the snake as opposed to live prey, and the frozen rodents can be obtained and stored easily until needed. Live prey can bite the snakes, causing serious injury and is not recommended. If your snake will not eat the thawed rodents, freshly killed rodents may be a compromise.

Snake Handling--Once you have obtained your snake, know that it is stressed and needs time to adjust to its new environment. It is best to leave it alone for a minimum of 5-7 days in a proper enclosure and then offer it a meal. Once it eats, wait a couple days for it to digest its meal. Snakes should not be handled until they have had a chance to digest their meal (minimum 24, preferably 48 hours.) In addition, snakes should not be handled during the times they are shedding.

Maintaining Health and Habitat--The following things should be monitored on a regular basis to maintain the health of your snake:
1.Cage Temperature- Check the temperature of the cage at least once daily or more often such as when the cage is first set up and seasonal changes.
2. Cleanliness-Spot cleaning to remove feces or shed skin should be done weekly, and complete cage cleaning once a month.
3. Water- Keep the water bowl in the center of the cage as the snake will be less likely to defecate in it (they typically defecate at the periphery.) Check the water bowl daily and clean the bowl at least once weekly.
4. Cage Security- Check cages to be sure latches/knobs etc are secure.
5. Feeding- Keep notes on all feedings(i.e. size, meal eaten, meals refused.)

6. General Health- The more you can observe your snake, the more you will know what is normal behavior and appearance, so you will know when something isn't right. We recommend yearly visits to the veterinarian for your snake to ensure health. If your snake is not eating for more than a week, blowing bubbles through its nose, eyes or mouth, regurgitating its meal, having difficulty breathing or has skin lesions, seek medical attention.

Informative websites:
ReptileKnowledge.com
Kingsnake.com
reptilerescue.com
reptilesmagazine.com