

Caring for Your Boa Constrictor

THINK!!!

First, the most important question - do you really want a snake that will get to be 10 feet long, weigh over 50 pounds, urinate and defecate like a St. Bernard, will live more than 30 years and for whom you will have to kill mice, rats and, eventually, rabbits and chickens? Many people think, if they decide they don't want their Boa when it is 8 or 10 feet long, that it will be easy to find someone who does. Take a look at the classified ads- they always have sale ads for big pythons and boas. The zoo doesn't want any more - they already have more giant snakes than they need. The local herpetology societies and reptile veterinarians always have big snakes for whom they are trying to find homes. At 8 feet and 40 pounds, a 2-year old Boa may already be eating rabbits a couple of times a month and can be very unwieldy to handle alone. You have to interact with them constantly to keep them tame - do you want a hungry, cranky 10 foot snake mistaking your face for prey? Who is going to help you clean its enclosure? take it to the vet when it's sick? take care of it when you go away to school or on vacation? No matter how much they love you, there are some things a mother, and your friends, will not do! Owning a big snake is not cool - it is a major, long-term responsibility.

Natural History

The name "Red-Tail Boa" has commonly been used by pet stores and snake aficionados to detract the public's attention from the fact that their proper name is Boa Constrictor. Many people who do not know much about snakes are fearful of large constrictors; "Red-Tail Boa" sounds much less threatening. In fact, not all Boa Constrictors are red-tailed. While many Boas on the market are true red-tailed Boa constrictor imported from Brazil, with a few coming from very limited areas in Columbia, the Amazon, Guyana, and Surinam, most are actually *B. c. imperator* from Columbia, with a few coming in from Mexico, Hogg Island and countries throughout Central America. There are six other subspecies of *B. c. constrictor* from South America which can sometimes be found in the retail and private pet trade. All of the Boa ssp. are listed as threatened on Appendix II of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES); the Argentine Boa (*B. c. occidentalis*) is on Appendix I - endangered. Appendix II animals can be exported and imported with the proper permits, and can legally be sold through the pet trade.

Ranging from the high cloud forests to the dry lands, these beautifully marked snakes are only moderately arboreal. Frequently found near human habitation (due to the quantity of rodents found near human habitats), Boas are primarily nocturnal or crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk). In the extreme northern and southern portions of their range, the Boas will often go through several weeks of inactivity to get through the periods of cold or drought. Those snakes living in the consistently high humid temperatures of the rain forest areas will remain active throughout the year. Boas devour a variety of prey in the wild - amphibians, lizards, other snakes, birds and mammals. In captivity, they should be fed pre-killed mice, rats, rabbits and chickens. You can buy the rodents and rabbits at pet stores; these animals have been specially raised and are clean, healthy and well-nourished. Chickens can be purchased at hatcheries; do not feed raw chicken pieces purchased at the grocery store - up to 80% of it may be infected with Salmonella bacteria. Under no circumstances should you feed your snakes wild-caught prey items. Wild rodents and other animals carry a variety of parasites and bacteria for which your snake has no

immunity. If you cannot afford to buy the proper food, you should not buy the snake. Personal Statistics That cute little 2 ounce, 14-22" hatchling laying cupped in the palm of your hand will increase its size by up to 300% in its first year, reaching 5-6 feet during that time. The following year will add another 3-4 feet to its length, not to speak of several pounds. After the second year, the growth rate slows down significantly, but snakes do continue to grow, however slightly, during their entire lives. Live bearers, females will give birth to 10-60 young (depending upon the subspecies) after a gestational period of 4-10 months (depending upon temperature and several other factors). Unlike most big snakes, many female Boas do not bear young each year.

Selecting Your Boa Constrictor

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes, and who actively flicks its tongue around when handled. When held, the snake should grip you gently but firmly when moving around. It should be alert to its surroundings. All young snakes are food for other, larger snakes, birds, lizards and mammalian predators so your hatchling may be a bit nervous at first but should settle down quickly. Like the pythons, Boas have anal spurs. These single claws appearing on either side of the vent are the vestigial remains of the hind legs snakes lost during their evolution from lizard to snake millions of years ago. Males have longer spurs than do the females. There is little difference in temperament between the two sexes. Imported Columbian B. c. imperator and B. c. constrictor are the nicest, least aggressive of all the Boas. The other true red-tails tend to be testy and aggressive. Captive-bred Boas of all subspecies tend to be more docile than their wild-caught counterparts.

GETTING STARTED

Snake-proof enclosure

Select an enclosure especially designed for housing snakes, such as the Critter Cottages with the combination fixed screen/hinged glass top. All snakes are escape artists; Boas are especially powerful and can easily break out of a tank sealed with a board and a couple of bricks. A good starter tank for a hatchling is a 20 gallon tank. After the first couple of years, you will have to build your own enclosure out of wood and glass or plexiglass or purchase a tank made by producers of large reptile enclosures. Be prepared - big snakes need lots of room, not the least of which is room enough for you to get in and clean their enclosure out!

Suitable substrate

Use paper towels or newspapers at first. These are easily and quickly removed and replaced when soiled and, with an import, will allow you to better monitor for the presence of mites and the condition of the feces. Once the animal is established, you can use more decorative ground cover such as commercially prepared shredded cypress or fir bark. Pine, cedar and aspen shavings should not be used as they can become lodged in the mouth while eating, causing respiratory and other problems. The shavings must be monitored closely and all soiled and wet shavings pulled out immediately to prevent bacteria and fungus growths. The utilitarian approach is to use inexpensive Astroturf and, later, linoleum. Extra pieces of Astroturf can be kept in reserve and used when the soiled piece is removed for cleaning and drying (soak in one part bleach to 30parts water; rinse thoroughly, and dry completely before reuse). Remember: the easier it is to clean, the faster you'll do it!

A hiding place can be provided for smaller Boas. A half-log (available at pet stores), an empty cardboard box or upside-down opaque plastic container, both with an access doorway cut into one end, can also be used. The plastic is easily cleaned when necessary; the box can be tossed out when soiled and replaced with a new one. Many Boas enjoy hanging out on branches; provide clean branches big enough to support the Boa's weight. If you use a found branch, soak first in bleach:water, then clean water to thoroughly rinse; place in cage only when completely dry.

Proper temperature range is essential to keeping your snake healthy. The ambient daytime air temperature throughout the enclosure must be maintained between 82-90oF, with a basking area kept at 88-95oF. At night, the ambient air temperature may be allowed to drop down no lower than 82-85oF. Special reptile heating pads that are manufactured to maintain a temperature about 20o higher than the air temperature may be used inside the enclosure. There are adhesive pads that can be stuck to the underside of a glass enclosure. Heating pads made for people, available at all drug stores, are also available; these have built-in high-medium-low switches and can be used under a glass enclosure. You can also use incandescent light bulbs in porcelain and metal reflector hoods to provide the additional heat required for the basking area. All lights must be screened off to prevent the snake from burning itself. All snakes are susceptible to thermal burns. For this same reason do not use a hot rock. Buy at least two thermometers - one to use in the overall area 1" above the enclosure floor, and the other 1" above the floor in the basking area. Don't try to guess the temperature - you will end up with a snake who will be too cold to eat and digest its food. Once your snake is bigger, invest in a pig blanket, a large rigid pad for which you can buy a thermostat to better control the temperature.

No special lighting is needed. You may use a full-spectrum light or low wattage incandescent bulb in the enclosure during the day. Make sure the snake cannot get into direct contact with the light bulbs. Snakes are prone to getting serious thermal burns.

Feeding

Allow your snake to acclimate for a couple of weeks to its new home. Start your hatchling off with a single pre-killed week to 10-day old "fuzzy" rat. A smaller sized hatchling may require a small mouse. Larger Boas may be fed larger pre-killed rats. The rule of thumb is that you can feed prey items that are no wider than the widest part of the snake's body. While Boas will often gladly eat prey that is actually too large for it, they will generally regurgitate the prey item one or more days later. Not a pretty sight. If you have not had any experience force feeding a snake, you may not want to try it yourself until you have seen someone do it. It is very easy to overfeed captive snakes as they do not get the exercise and calorie burn in captivity that they do in the wild. Be judicious - you will end up with a big snake soon enough. Just feed enough to keep it healthy, not obese.

Provide a bowl of fresh water at all times; your snake will both drink and soak, and may defecate, in it. Check it often and change it as needed.

Routine veterinary screening for newly acquired snakes is very important. Many of the parasites infesting Boas and other reptiles can be transmitted to humans and other reptiles. Left untreated, such infestations can ultimately kill your snake. When your snake first defecates, collect the feces in a clean plastic bag, seal it, label it with the date, your name and phone number and the snake's name, and take it and your

snake to a vet who is experienced with reptiles. There it will be tested and the proper medication given.

Handling your new snake

After giving your Boa a couple of days to settle in, begin picking it up and handling it gently. It may move from you, and may threaten you by doing tail lashings and hissing. Be gentle but persistent. Daily contact will begin to establish a level of trust and confidence between you and your snake. When it is comfortable with you, you can begin taking it around the house. Don't get over-confident! Given a chance and close proximity to seat cushions, your Boa will make a run (well, a slither) for it, easing down between the cushions and from there, to points possibly unknown. Always be gentle, and try to avoid sudden movements. If the snake wraps around your arm or neck, you can unwind it by gently unwrapping it from around you starting from its tail end - not the head.

Necessities

Some things you should have on hand for general maintenance and first aid include: Novalsan (Chlorhexidine diacetate) for cleaning enclosures and disinfecting food and water bowls, litter boxes, tubs and sinks etc. Betadine (povidone/iodine) for cleansing scratches and wounds. Set aside a food storage bowl, feeding and water bowls, soaking bowl or tub.