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Boa Constrictor Care

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Brief Description

Boa **c**onstrictor refers to a number of live-bearing large snakes from Central and South America with multiple different subspecies based on locality. This care sheet applies to all Central and South American boas and their various subspecies, including red tail boas. Boa Constrictors are very popular pet snakes due to their hardiness and generally docile disposition. Boa constrictors have been bred in captivity for many years so finding a captive bred individual should not be difficult and is highly recommended as opposed to a wild caught animal. Adult females can get up to 8-10 feet in length with males being slightly smaller. Some of the island localities remain smaller.



Lifespan

With good care the expected lifespan is 20-35 years on average.

Sexing

The most common way to determine gender of snakes is to have them probed, where the hemipene pocket length is measured to determine if it male or female. Males will have much deeper pockets than females (this should be done by someone experienced with probing).

Caging

Boa constrictor enclosures can range from very simple to very elaborate. Ideally your snake should have enough room to stretch the entire length of its body straight without touching the ends. A newly hatched snake would do well in a 20-gallon enclosure, but would grow rapidly and as an adult may need custom caging. Rack style cages are also used successfully with smaller tanks with an under-tank-heater to maintain a temperature gradient but offer minimal enrichment. The lid of the enclosure needs to be secure as snakes can stretch to the top of even tall tanks and forcibly push a lid off. The cage should contain at least two hides that have only one opening (not the half logs) and allow the snake to fit snugly within it. Lack of appropriate hides will cause stress. Only one boa constrictor should be kept per cage.

Substrate

There are a variety of options. Newspaper, paper towels or artificial turf like reptile carpet can be used for minimal mess and clean up as long as appropriate hides are provided. Aspen shavings, mulch, and soil allow burrowing but are more difficult to clean and can harbor mold or bacterial growth if not cleaned regularly. Sand and cedar or pine shavings should be avoided.

Lighting and Temperature

Reptiles are ectotherms (cold-blooded), meaning they need to absorb heat from their environment to regulate their own body heat since they cannot produce it. The basking spot should be around **85-90 degrees** at the level of the basking spot and the cooler end of the cage should be kept around **75-80 degrees**. A thermometer should be placed at both ends of the cage to accurately measure temperatures. Boa constrictors do *not* require UVB lighting.

Water

A shallow water dish with fresh water at least big enough for your whole snake's body to fit in curled up should be available at all times. It should be stable, so it cannot be spilled, and it should be easy to climb in and out of from all sides. Dog food dishes can work well for smaller snakes, and there are many dishes made for snakes. Snakes enjoy full body soakings but often defecate in their water so it needs to be cleaned often. Large plastic storage containers may be your best option for a fully grown adult snake. Make sure to account for the size of your snake as water may be displaced and flood your cage.

Humidity

Humidity in the enclosure should be 50-60% and should be monitored by a hygrometer. Inadequate humidity will affect your reptile's ability to shed its skin properly and can cause serious problems.

Food
Boa constrictors feed on a variety of prey in the wild. Rodents of appropriate size are the most reliable prey item for animals in captivity Young boas should be fed once weekly, whereas adults can be fed every other week. Appropriately sized prey should be no bigger in circumference than the boa at its largest circumference. Feeding thawed frozen prey is preferred as offering live prey can lead to a more aggressive snake and potential injury to the snake that can be very severe. Frozen prey should be warmed basically to body temperature (98-99 degrees) to stimulate your snake to eat it. Thawing prey in hot water is preferable. Do not microwave prey.

Younger snakes (16-30 inches, or less than 3 years old) that are still growing fast should be fed about once a week. Rat pups or mouse hoppers are generally a good size for younger snakes, although smaller may be needed for hatchlings. Older snakes (30-48 inches or over 3 years old) won't need to feed as often and can be fed once every 2-3 weeks. Small to medium rats are often appropriate size for adult snakes. Some sources will suggest feeding more often, but many captive snakes often become obese. Snakes in the wild don't have the opportunity to become obese due to less food availability, and more activity hunting for it. A good rule of thumb when selecting prey sizes is to choose a prey item that is either the same size or just a little smaller around in diameter than the largest portion of the snake.

Quarantine
Always quarantine a new snake in a separate room from your collection for at least 3 months to reduce risk of transmissible diseases and infections. Do not share cage furnishings, water bowls, substrate, feeding tongs, etc. with the rest of your collection and handle the new snake AFTER the rest of your collection. If the new snake shows no signs of illness after the quarantine period it can be added to the collection with minimized risk, although some snakes can harbor illnesses without showing clinical signs.
Read more about proper quarantine procedures here.

Respiratory Infections
Unfortunately, respiratory infections are very common in boa constrictors and can be caused by bacteria and/or many viruses that are contagious. Possible signs of infection are wheezing or clicking with breathing noises, bubbles from the nose or mouth, frequent yawning or open mouth breathing, holding head pointed upwards while resting, getting substrate stuck in the mouth, and not eating. Not all signs need to be present to be consistent with respiratory infection. Since so many infections are viral in origin the treatment with antibiotics is not always successful. Inclusion Body Disease (IBD) is caused by Arenavirus and is very common in boa constrictors across the US. Not all snakes will be symptomatic even if they are infected, but symptoms can include neurologic signs such as "star-gazing", rolling onto the back or tremors, regurgitation, weight loss, or immune suppression causing stomatitis, pneumonia, skin tumors, or leukemia. Viral testing and blood testing are needed to confirm this disease but once symptoms start it is generally fatal.