BOA CONSTRICTOR CARE

The Common or Red-tailed Boa (*Boa constrictor constrictor*) originates from the rainforests of Southern America, where it can be found in a variety of places from the forest floor to trees, and even in water at times. Anyone thinking of owning a boa should carefully consider the size of an adult snake, and consider the space requirement, expense, and dangers of owning such a snake, which can grow at least 2-3m in length, and can live for 20-30 years in captivity.

ACCOMMODATION

- As large a vivarium or purpose-built enclosure as possible should be provided to enable room for exercise, and a thermal gradient to be created along the length of the tank (hot to cold). Wooden or fibreglass vivaria will provide the snake with some visual security and ventilation can be provided at snake level.
- Good ventilation is required and additional ventilation holes may need to be created.
- Hides are required to provide some security. Artificial plants, cardboard boxes, plant pots, logs or commercially available hides can be used. They should be placed both at the warm and cooler ends of the tank.
- Substrates suitable for housing snakes include newspaper, Astroturf and some of the commercially available substrates. It is important that the substrates either cannot be eaten, or if they are, do not cause blockages as this can prove fatal. Wood chip based substrates should never be used for this reason.
- The vivarium should be cleaned out at least once a week with a suitable disinfectant and spot cleaned daily to help prevent disease.

TEMPERATURES AND HUMIDITY

- Reptiles are ectothermic so a heat source is required.
- Typically a spot area is created using a spot bulb, providing a basking temperature of 35^{0}C. This should be kept on all day. Temperatures must be measured to ensure the tank is not overheating especially in a small vivarium. The cool end should be maintained at 25^{0}C.
- Background heat can be provided with a heat mat (on the back wall) a tubular heater, a heat plate or a ceramic bulb. This should be set on a thermostat so that the overnight temperature does not drop below 25^{0}C.
- Temperatures should be measured with a maximum/minimum thermometer. During the cold winter months careful checking is required to ensure the heat sources are keeping the tank sufficiently warm. Heat sources should be guarded to prevent thermal burns.
- Humidity should be checked with a hygrometer and kept moderately high by spraying or fogging the enclosure at regular intervals.

LIGHTING

- Despite being crepuscular species (active at dawn and dusk), boa constrictors appear to benefit from UV-b light.
- A low percentage UV light is recommended. This will need to be on all day for 12 hours and at an appropriate distance from the snake as recommended by the manufacturer. A small branch or rock can be placed below the basking site (please ask for further information on UV light in reptiles).

- All UV-b bulbs should be checked regularly for their UV output and should be changed at least as frequently as manufacturer's instructions.

COMPANIONS

- In general the happiest snake is the solitary snake.

WHAT TO FEED

- Boa constrictors are carnivores and their main diet consists of pink mice and fuzzies for hatchlings. As the snake grows, so will the frequency & amount of food given and an increase in prey size, from pinkie mice to larger prey such as rats should be given. Food should be defrosted and warmed to blood temperature 37^{0}C prior to feeding. Handling should be avoided to stop contamination with human scent. Ideally brown or black rodents should be fed in preference to white rodents.
- Water should always be available and a container is required which will allow the snake to submerge completely. This should be changed daily.

SALMONELLA

- All reptiles can potentially carry Salmonella.
- However it is rarely a cause of illness in reptiles and treatment is not required.
- It can be transmitted to people (especially young children or those who are immuno-compromised) so good hygiene after handing the reptile is important. Generally washing your hands in soap is sufficient. There are commercially available disinfectants that can be used as an alternative.