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SNAKES

African Rock Python

Python sebae

Python sebae is Africa's largest snake: a heavy-bodied, brownish python with a dark spear-shaped mark on the head and stair-step blotches along the back. Adults are usually 300-500 cm long and weigh 45-65 kg. The species lives in savanna, forest and by water south of the Sahara, has a reputation for being irritable and needs a very large, escape-proof enclosure, a pool and great experience.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Python sebae sebae*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**300-500 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**15-30 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and semi-aquatic**
Habitat	**Savanna, rainforest and wetland**
Difficulty	**Expert**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**300 × 150 × 120 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**27-31 °C**
Basking spot	**32-34 °C**
Temperature, night	**26-28 °C**
Humidity	**60-70%**
Water	**Water section**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 2
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**36-60 months**
Clutch size	**20-100 eggs**
Incubation	**65-80 days** at 31-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
EU annex	**Annex B**
IUCN	**Near Threatened (NT)**

About the species

Python sebae is a heavily built snake with smooth scales, a triangular head and heat-sensitive pits along the lips. The body is yellowish, grey-brown or grey-green with dark blotches, which on the back merge into an irregular, stair-step stripe. On the head lies a dark brown mark in the shape of a spearhead, edged with paler yellow, and beneath each eye is a yellow triangle. The belly is white with black dots, and the tip of the tail has two dark bands. Young animals are more sharply marked than adults, and animals from West and Central Africa are often slightly brighter in colour than animals from the north, east and south.

Adults are normally 300-500 cm and weigh about 45-65 kg. A few animals grow far larger: lengths over 600 cm are considered reliable, and the largest confirmed records are 750-760 cm. The female is larger than the male. Size varies with habitat, and animals are smaller where many people live. The young are 45-60 cm at hatching.

P. sebae was formerly regarded as one species together with *Python natalensis* from southern Africa, but the two are now regarded as separate species. Information in older literature and in the trade may therefore come from the other species.

The species has a reputation for being irritable. Animals caught in the wild rarely get used to handling, and even captive-bred animals are often defensive. The bites are deep and very painful because of the long, backward-curving teeth, and a fully grown animal is strong enough to be life-threatening. The species demands great experience, space and money for many years.

Read more: Buying animals: captive-bred, wild-caught and transport

Distribution and habitat

Python sebae lives in tropical Africa south of the Sahara. Its range runs from Senegal and Mauritania east to Ethiopia and Somalia and south to northern Angola and Tanzania, and it includes West and Central Africa, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya, among others. The type locality is somewhere in West Africa.

To the south the species is replaced by *Python natalensis*, and the two species overlap in Kenya and northern Tanzania. Introduced animals are found in Florida, but they do not belong to the native range. The species occurs up to 2,300 m above sea level, but most animals live far lower.

> **Native range:** Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Kenya, Congo - Kinshasa, Congo - Brazzaville, Gabon, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Angola, Somalia and Equatorial Guinea.

HABITAT

P. sebae lives in many habitat types: moist, open savanna, rainforest, grassland, semi-desert and rocky areas. It is closely tied to water and is found on the banks of marshes, lakes and rivers. It also manages in disturbed land around settlements, where it takes poultry and other livestock. For shelter it uses rock caves, termite mounds, hollow trees and mammal burrows. In the dry season the animals become less active.

The animal is ground-living but climbs when it needs to. It swims well and can stay under water for a long time. Young animals are most active at dusk, while adults are nocturnal and occasionally bask to warm up.

The species is solitary, and the animals come together only in the breeding season. Young animals eat small mammals such as rats, while adults take large prey: small antelopes, monkeys, hyraxes, birds, large lizards and crocodiles. The snake hunts at dusk using its sense of smell and heat pits, strikes and wraps its body around the prey so that the heart stops. The prey is swallowed whole, and a large meal can keep the animal satisfied for a long time. The female stays with her eggs until after they hatch.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

No detailed care information exists for *Python sebae*, which is a rarely kept species, and size, warmth, humidity and diet are therefore borrowed from *Python bivittatus* and *Python molurus*, which are kept in captivity in the same way. The figures are cautious estimates.

Size is the greatest challenge. The animal must be able to stretch out fully, and the width must be half the animal's length. For an animal of 300 cm the enclosure must be at least 300 × 150 × 120 cm, and for an animal of 450 cm at least 450 × 225 × 120 cm or a whole room. The young are 45-60 cm at hatching and grow quickly, so for a short period they can live in a smaller enclosure, but they must be moved before they reach 150 cm.

The enclosure must be escape-proof with lockable doors, and the snake must not be able to push up against the lid or doors. Ventilation is at the sides, so that moisture and heat do not escape through the top. The material must be smooth and easy to clean, and one or two sides can be covered so that the animal feels secure.

The substrate must be at least 10 cm deep and tolerate moisture: for example coconut chips or a mixture of soil and coconut fibre. For very large set-ups, newspaper is practical. The animal produces large amounts of faeces and urine, so the substrate must be changed often. Furnish with solid branches and shelves low in the enclosure, at least two large hides and fixed plants or artificial foliage. Everything must be fixed in place so that it cannot fall onto the animal.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure needs a clear gradient. The basking spot should be 32-34 °C, measured with an infrared thermometer, the rest of the enclosure 27-31 °C by day and 26-28 °C at night. The temperature must not fall below 26 °C at night, so most set-ups need a heat source that gives no light, for example a radiant heat panel.

A cluster of halogen bulbs over the basking spot warms the whole animal from above. All heat lamps must have protective guards so that the animal cannot burn itself. Heat mats and heating cables require a proportional thermostat with the probe directly under the heat source. Never use heat rocks. Digital thermometers are placed at the basking spot and at the cool end. Too little heat causes refusal to feed and respiratory infection.

In the wild the animals become less active in the dry season. There are no documented recommendations for cooler periods in captivity, and animals that are not to be bred are kept at an even temperature all year.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 60-70 %, measured with a digital hygrometer in the middle of the enclosure. The species lives in moist savanna and forest near water, and the figure is borrowed from *Python bivittatus*. The enclosure must be able to dry out between mistings, because clammy air causes respiratory infection.

The animal needs a large, deep pool on the floor, which is also its drinking water. It must at least be large enough for the animal to lie coiled in it with a little room to spare, and preferably large enough for it to swim. The water is changed every week and immediately if it is dirty, and the pool is scrubbed with an animal disinfectant. Misting a couple of times a day and a substrate that can hold a little moisture are usually enough. During a shed, a more humid zone with a humid hide helps.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is most active at dusk and at night, but it needs a fixed day-night rhythm with about 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness. UVB is not strictly necessary but is recommended, because in the wild the animal comes out into daylight, and because the light supports vitamin D, immune function and appetite. The zone is borrowed from *P. molurus* and *P. bivittatus*: Ferguson zone 2. Use a T5 HO tube with 5-6 % UVB over the warm side, covering about half the length of the enclosure. The aim is a UV index of 2-3 at the basking spot, and it is checked with a UV meter. The tubes are replaced every 12 months.

Halogen lamps and UVB tubes alone do not give enough light in a large enclosure. Supplement with T5 fluorescent tubes or powerful LED bars over most of the length. The light must not be on at night.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

P. sebae is a carnivore and needs whole prey animals of mammals and birds. Rats are the standard, and as the animal grows, rabbits, guinea pigs, quail and chicks are used. Feed thawed, frozen animals, thawed in a bag in warm water to about 38 °C. This is safer than live prey, which can injure the snake. Use long feeding tongs, because the species has a powerful feeding response and strikes quickly.

The thickness of the prey should be 1-1.5 times the snake's body width. Larger prey requires a longer pause. Feeding frequency: - Young under 1 year: every 1-2 weeks. - Young animals of 1-2 years: every 2-3 weeks. - Young adults of 3-4 years: every 3-4 weeks. - Adults over 4 years: every 4-6 weeks.

An adult animal can go several months without food without harm, and feeding too often causes obesity, organ damage and a shorter life. Feed only when another person is present, and use a fixed routine so that the animal can tell feeding from cleaning: a knock on the door means food, and a snake hook means cleaning. After a meal the animal must be left in peace for at least two days. Drinking water is always available in the pool.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

P. sebae is one of the most defensive pythons. Animals caught in the wild rarely get used to handling or to living in an enclosure, and even captive-bred animals do not always become calm. An animal over 300 cm is stronger than a human and can be life-threatening. An adult animal may be handled only when at least two people are present, and children must never

be alone with it.

A new animal must have at least 3 months of quarantine, and handling begins only once the animal is eating regularly. Lift with one hand behind the head and one under the body, and never take hold of the tail. The snake winds itself around the arms as if they were branches. Do not let it coil around the neck. The animal must not be handled when its eyes are bluish before a shed, or for the first 2 days after a meal.

The animals are kept separately. The female stays with her eggs and defends them, and a female with eggs is even more defensive.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The female is larger than the male. Sex is most reliably determined with a probe, which only an experienced person or a vet should use. The animals become sexually mature after 3-5 years. Males begin to breed at about 180 cm, while females first breed after reaching at least 270 cm.

MATING

Mating most often takes place from November to March, triggered by falling temperature and shorter days. Males and females stop feeding during the breeding season, and the females continue until the eggs have hatched. Details of mating and cooler periods in captivity are not documented for the species. Breeding should be considered only with great care, because a large animal is hard to rehome.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays her eggs about 3 months after mating, in the wild in a cave, a termite mound or a mammal burrow. The clutch is 20-100 eggs, most often 20-50, and the eggs are large: about 10 cm long and 130-170 g. The female coils around the eggs and stays with them without eating. She needs a large, quiet hide and water.

INCUBATION

For artificial incubation the eggs must lie at 31-32 °C and high humidity, for example on damp vermiculite in a closed container with a couple of air holes. They hatch after 65-80 days. Do not help with the hatching.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are 45-60 cm at hatching and are independent from the first day. They are kept singly in a secure box with a hide, water and a heat source. They grow quickly and must be moved to larger units at regular intervals.

Health and common mistakes

Almost all illnesses in *Python sebae* in captivity are linked to husbandry: too little space, too little heat, incorrect humidity or too much food. Watch for:

- Overweight. An adult snake should not be fed more often than every 4-6 weeks; fat around the organs shortens life.
- Respiratory infection, which shows as wheezing or rattling breathing, mucus in the mouth or an open mouth. The cause is most often temperature that is too low or damp, stagnant air. Needs a vet.
- Shedding in pieces when the air is too dry. A humid hide and a soak in the pool help.
- Burns, if the snake can get right up to a heat bulb or lies on a heat mat without a thermostat.
- Mites, which show as small black dots around the eyes and under the scales, and intestinal worms in wild-caught animals. Buy captive-bred animals, and keep new animals in quarantine for at least 3 months.
- Regurgitation, when the snake is disturbed or handled in the first few days after a meal.

Weigh the snake regularly, and note down feeding, sheds and behaviour so that a change is noticed early. Contact a vet with reptile experience if the snake loses weight, breathes with difficulty or refuses to eat for several months outside the breeding season.

Always ask someone who knows

This guide is a good place to start, but it cannot replace experience. Animals differ, and much of what matters most is learned from people who have kept the species for years. Talk to a breeder, an experienced keeper or a vet who knows reptiles and amphibians before you get the animal - and again if anything looks wrong.