

Prevent Problems with Large Boas & Pythons

According to the Humane Society of the United States, 17 deaths and many more injuries have been related to large constrictors since 1978. Given the tens of thousands of large constrictors sold, the incidence of fatalities and injuries is relatively low, however every incident—including the death of four babies in their cribs and three additional children—is particularly tragic since such cases are completely preventable.

So called “giant snakes” regularly exceed 8 feet (2.4 m) in length, potentially making them difficult or even unsafe to handle. Large constrictor species include the green anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*), Indian python (*Python molurus*), African rock python (*Python sebae*), amethystine python (*Morelia amethystina*), reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*), and Burmese python (*Python molurus bivittatus*). Only the latter two species, reticulated and Burmese pythons, are regularly found in the pet trade, however these species can exceed 20 feet (6.1 m) and are not recommended for casual hobbyists.

One real life tragedy:

In 2011, a Florida mother and her boyfriend were found guilty of the murder of her 2-year old daughter, strangled by her 8-foot 6-inch pet Burmese python. The child was found in her crib, with the snake coiled tightly around her neck and numerous bite marks on her face.

*“The baby’s dead.
Our stupid snake
got out in the middle
of the night and
strangled the
baby”.—Florida man
in a frantic 911 call*

Evaluation of the albino python named “Gypsy” found her to be underweight, and the snake’s enclosure had only a quilt for a lid.

Snake Safety Tips

Responsible large constrictor ownership addresses animal safety, owner safety, as well as the safety of family members and the general public:

Do NOT smell like snake food

Snakes have a poor vision, and they recognize prey items primarily by smell. If your hand smells like a meal, the snake may consider your hand fair prey (pun intended)! Do not allow prey scent to get on your clothing either.

DO thoroughly wash your hands after handling prey items

Wash your hands after handling rodents, rabbits, and other prey items before handling snakes.

DO have assistants when handling large snakes.

A good safety rule of thumb is to have one handler for every 3 to 4 feet (0.9-1.2 m) (minimum 5 feet or 1.5 m) of snake. Assistants should be used for all restraint and handling, even for routine husbandry tasks such as water changes or cage cleaning.

Do NOT allow a boa or python to form a complete loop around your neck

Large constrictors are incredibly strong. Simply by tightening muscles to maintain balance, a giant snake can cause injury by stopping blood flow to the brain or cutting off air flow, resulting in loss of consciousness.

Avoid coiling giant snakes around the torso as well.

“For a snake to be strong enough to pull me in a bush—I’m 6 feet tall...and he pulled me in a bush”—Louisiana gardener, bitten and dragged by a 5-foot python loose in a residential area

Do NOT house large constrictors around minor children

The American Federation of Herpetoculturalists does not recommend the ownership of giant constrictors by minors without parental consent and parental responsibility for proper housing, maintenance, and supervision during handling.

Do NOT train your snake to strike

Behaviors can be trained in snakes. For instance, if a cage door is only opened to insert prey items, your snake will eventually associate the opening of a door with mealtime. In essence, you have conditioned your snake to expect food and strike every time the cage door is opened.

DO give your snake “warning” before picking it up

If you are unable to handle your snake routinely, use a snake hook to move part of its body forward and gently touch the snake before picking it up. Or cover the head with a cloth and gently stroke the back before picking it up.

DO note and appreciate body language

Carefully watch snake body language as snakes can strike out of fear or aggression.

- A potentially aggressive snake, stalks its prey stealthily, with an active, flickering tongue and its eyes riveted on the item of interest.
- A fearful snake tends to draw its body back into rigid coils with the head held up and away from the perceived threat. The mouth may be open.

Regardless of the underlying reason for the bite, once the snake strikes a feeding response may be stimulated in which coils are thrown around the perceived prey, especially if the prey struggles.

DO use tongs to feed your snake

Never offer food by hand. Minimize your risk by using long-handled tongs for feeding.

DO keep your large snake well fed

Although obesity is a danger in any large, captive carnivore like the snake, large constrictors should be fed regularly. Your snake will be more likely to strike if it is not fed often enough.

DO confine your large snake to a secure enclosure

Always keep your large snake in a securely locked, escape-proof enclosure, accessible only by you, the owner. A secure cage should have a hinged lid or doors, or a sliding glass front with a locking mechanism. Preferably the snake enclosure should be housed in a large room designed to prevent snake escapes and with a door that is kept shut, or preferably locked, when not in use.

DO transport all snakes in a manner that prevents escape

Transport large snakes in sturdy cloth bag free of holes that are placed within a box or similar container with holes for aeration. The exterior box or container should be sealed or locked shut.

Alternatively snakes can be “double bagged”, however it can be difficult to find cloth bags that are sturdy enough yet with a weave that allows air flow.

Develop a proper safety routine now...

Accidents and injuries with reptiles can almost always be traced back to irresponsible herpetocultural practices. Even if your snake is not overly large, many species will grow, and grow, and grow! Get in the habit of utilizing proper safety precautions now so that these safeguards become second nature by the time your snake is a “giant”.

References

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