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## BOOK REVIEW

By: Anton van Woerkom.

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***The Natural History of West Indian Boas*, by Peter J. Tolson and Robert W. Henderson.** First Edition, 1993. Published by R & A Publ. Ltd., 37 Rowbarton Close, Taunton, Somerset, TA2 7QD, England. Pp. 1-125, 73 colour photos of habitats and snakes. Price £ 45.00. In the Americas this title is distributed by Eric Thiss, Serpent's Tale, 464 Second Street, Excelsior, MN 55331, U.S.A.

I have been a snake keeper for more than 20 years and for part of this time I have kept boas. American boas have always been a special attraction to me, so when some two years ago I learned that a book on the hardly known West Indian boas was in preparation I was tensed at once.

It took a few years to come to publication, but the result was worth waiting for. After a short introduction the book starts with two chapters on the climate and habitat of the West Indies and the Lesser Antilles. Each island or group of islands has been described and the whole is illustrated with many colour pictures of the landscape. The chapters on phylogeny and zoogeography are kept short and for more information the reader is referred to more detailed sources in literature.

Keys are provided for determination of the genera of West Indian boas and for determination of the species within the genus. It is a pity that the head scale formula, an essential character in the key for *Epicrates*, has been explained only in a small note on page 30, and readers are advised for more information to look to a figure in another publication. Was there really no room in this book for a clarifying illustration or am I the only one having problems with a head scale formula like  $3/4-1-2/3/5$  (page 29, branch 4-b).

The problem becomes even more evident when you follow branch 4-b to branch 5, where you have to choose between head scale formulas  $4-1-2$  and  $3/5-1/2-3/4/5$ . The latter is impossible, because branch 4 excludes a snake with e.g. head scale formula  $5-2-4$ , while branch 5 does not. A pure theoretical problem? Certainly not, look for instance at branch 7 for the formula of *Epicrates exsul*. I propose to write head scale formulas in the future as follows (for page 29, branch 4-b):  $(3/4)-(1)-(2/3/5)$ . At this point then at least there will be no confusion any more.

The keys are followed by the species accounts, which give all available information on: description, distribution, habitat, food habits, reproductive notes and conservation status. When subspecies are present these are dealt with in the same way when enough information is present.

Maps and colour pictures complete the scene. This book proves its value, because the data on these animals, formerly scattered in numerous publications, has been brought together with the personal information from Tolson and Henderson so presenting an indispensable work.

That quite a number of colour pictures are only of moderate quality is acceptable because they probably had to be scraped together from many sources. But the fact that for the dust jacket a picture has been chosen that is out of focus was surely unnecessary.

The book concludes with an interesting chapter on reproductive biology and a chapter on conservation. I always become sad when I read about the decline of snake (and other

animal) populations. For the West Indies this is (like always) the result of the introduction onto the islands of rats, cats, mongoose, goats and pigs. Also habitat destruction by industry and tourism and pet trade are important courses.

The book finishes with the striking '... protection will have to be accomplished within the framework of complete ecosystem management rather than a species-by-species approach ...', of which we all know that this is very true. So let us be very careful with our natural resources. The book is quite expensive but I think it is interesting enough for the real snake lover because it is the only real book on this specialised subject.