

NOTES ON THE CAPTIVE REPRODUCTION OF THE AFRICAN ROCK PYTHON (*PYTHON SEBAE* SPP.)

Emanuele Cimatti, Via Volterra 7, 40135 Bologna, Italy.

Phone: +39-051-6447492; fax: +39-051-436795; Email: tov9602@iperbole.bologna.it

INTRODUCTION

The African rock python (*Python sebae*), called also the 'hieroglyphic python' for its beautiful decorated coat, is the biggest snake of Africa: it is able to reach a length of about eight metres (24,4 feet), although there are examples of nine metres (27,4 feet). The African rock python occurs frequently in Central and Southern Africa but it doesn't exist in the Saharan and Mediterranean areas: it lives in savannahs, hilly rocky areas, open plains, shrubby steppes and marshes, while rarely it ventures into the nearly forests. It preys upon rodents and ground birds, but it can also eat wild boar, goats, crocodiles and young antelopes; it often reach human settlements, where it feed themselves with fowls, dogs, sheeps and does. Sometimes the African rock python may attack man.

The herpetologists recognize only two subspecies, the African rock python (*Python sebae sebae*), and the Natal rock python (*Python sebae*

nataliensis): the last one is present in the African south eastern region only (Natal, Republic of South Africa). In captivity, this python is not very popular owing to its large size and its bad temperament. All the same, it is very beautiful in pattern and colour, and it is healthy and hardy.

CAPTIVITY

I had two African rock pythons some years ago: the male was three metres and the female was four metres. They were captive-born in a private collection. I determined sex by probes: in the male the probe passed to the depth of 11 subcaudal scales, in the fema-



Pytho Sebae Photo by Emanuelle Cimatti





le the probe reached only 2 subcaudal scales. The two African rock pythons were housed separately in two spacious wooden-bodied cages (100x100x70 cm), in which there were a permeable and dry substrate (cat litter), a hide place (a cave made of big rocks), a tank full of water, and some climbing branches. During the day, the temperature was 25-32°C (77-89.6°F), and it could fall until 18-20°C (64.4-68°F) at night (that depended on the room's temperature). The low temperature was not ever a problem, because this python has a great tolerance to cold. The humidity was quite low (45-60%), because this python prefers a not humid climate. They fed rats, hamsters, quails and rabbits: in the beginning, I offered them live preys, but then dead food only. They fed every three or four weeks.

BREEDING

During summer (pre-breeding phase), the pythons were fed frequently with two preys every weeks. In autumn, I reared the male and the female separately at a temperature of 18°C (64,4°F) at night and of 22°C (71,6°F) during the day for 8 weeks, without feeding them. After that period, the temperature was brought back to normal values and the female was fed abundantly (two quails every week). After 3 weeks, I put them together and I stopped feeding. The coupling took place after one week, and it happened many times for one month (Figure 1).

Then, the pregnant female was stabled alone at a 30°C temperature (86°F). After 139 days, it laid 49 eggs (which measured 9 x 15 centi-



Python Sebae Photo by Emanuelle Cimatti

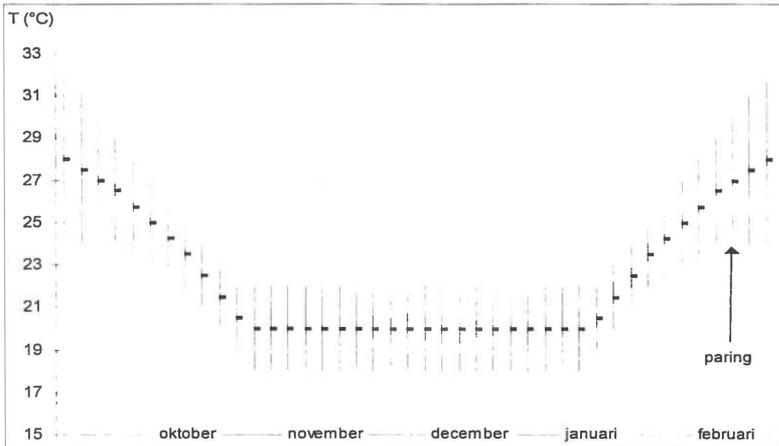


Figure 1. Temperature cycle.

metres), and it brooded them. I removed the eggs from the female (it defended them with hissing and bites), and I incubated them in an artificial incubator (Figure 2), with a temperature of 30-32°C (86-89.6°F) and a humidity of 90%.

After 74 days, all eggs hatched, and the young were 50-58 centimetres (19.7-22.8 inches). They sloughed after about ten days, and immediately they fed on pre-killed mice.

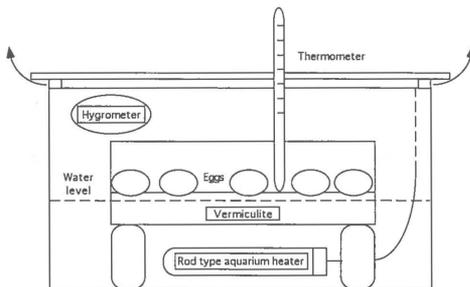


Figure 2. artificial incubator.

CONCLUSIONS

In captivity the African rock python keeps a fierce and bad temperament: it bites and hisses, and it has not an easy and foreseeable character. My pythons showed always an evident behavioural instability, and they had to be handled with great caution. Also the young had the same disposition, and recurrent handling didn't change it. All the same, this python is long-lived (it can live even 30 years), and it is a strong and healthy snake. Besides, it breeds easily: its reproductive behaviour is typically seasonal, and that makes quite simple to induce courtship and mating.

