

VENOMOUS SNAKES I: THE GOLDEN RULES

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The keeping of venomous snakes by private individuals is illegal in most urban areas, and is generally held in dim view by society as a whole. I will not delve into the moralities of this issue, but we must understand that there are serious people out there who keep and love these fascinating and misunderstood reptiles.

The captive maintenance of "hot" snakes and *Heloderma* lizards is certainly not without risk, and it cannot be stressed strongly enough that there is **NO ROOM FOR ERROR!** A bite or an escape by a captive venomous snake is a matter of grave concern and can create numerous problems like: embarrassing press and legalities, "witch hunting" of fellow herp keepers by public authorities and hospitals that are without proper antivenin and inexperienced with the relatively uncommon occurrence of venomous snakebite, especially by exotic species. Still, there are individuals out there who are serious, experienced herpetoculturists who are highly skilled in the keeping and handling of venomous reptiles.

Then there are the irresponsible and sensationalistic people who obtain a rattlesnake or cobra to be "cool" or show off with and, eventually, get "nailed" (bitten) or cause other problems, much to the dismay of serious herpers. To some herpers already well-experienced with harmless species, the allure of keeping a hot reptile can be a strong one. Venomous reptiles are truly fascinating and present habits, behavior and challenges not often found in their non-venomous brethren.

Most species display an attitude and confidence which suggests that they are fully aware of their damaging capabilities and are fully prepared to use their "guns" if hard pressed. But even large or particularly aggressive species like Taipans, Mambas, cobras, saw-scaled or russell's vipers will seek escape if given the opportunity. We must remember always that **SAFETY COMES FIRST!** Much the same as driving a car, it's only as safe as you make it. For those of you who are considering adding a venomous snake to your existing collection, I would strongly recommend that you have **AT LEAST 5-8 yrs.** experience with various non-venomous snakes (especially aggressive specimens) under your belt before even contemplating venomous snake husbandry. Also, you should read everything you can get your hands on about venomous snakes and their captive maintenance. In the bibliography I've included books which I feel are the "Bibles" on the care of venomous snakes and bite toxicology. It may help to discreetly inquire as to who keeps hot stuff and see if they might "show you the ropes". This is how I learned years ago, and most experienced hot keepers can tell if you are genuinely serious or not. Almost all hot keepers are understandably secretive, but love to "talk hot stuff" and share information about their care if you are serious and pose no threat to them or their animals.

For those with a hankerin' for something hot, I've compiled a list from various sources and personal experience, of management and safety measures for the responsible keeping of venomous reptiles:





HOUSING

■ Venomous reptiles should be housed in solid, secure, locked cages within a locked room.

■ Cages should be constructed of strong, quality materials (1/2" plywood min.) with no gaps or cracks large enough for newborn snakes to escape from. A good rule of thumb here is, any crack or hole large enough for the snake to put his snout in up to the eyes, is NOT secure. If it can do this, it's gone GUARANTEED!

■ No cracked glass, bricks or lid weights, screen front cages or duct tape. Ask me about the horrors of using duct tape in or on cages, including what was probably the worst misjudgment mistake I've ever made. Besides, it looks cheesy and doesn't impress anyone!

■ The room itself MUST be absolutely sealed. You can't scrimp here folks! This means using fine screening over air ducts and cracks along the baseboards, sealing the bottom of room doors (incl. closets) and making sure that windows fit snugly and are lockable. IT IS VITAL THAT THERE ARE NO HOLES INTO THE WALLS OR BUILDING STRUCTURE!!

■ Venomous snake rooms should be free of clutter and large immovable cages should have the back end sealed against the wall so that fast and/or agile species cannot run and hide behind them. Have as much floor area as possible when working with hot snakes. Just try handling a cobra with junk around your feet or getting a

boomsnang out from behind a 400lb. cage. Fun? I think not!

■ A good policy is to keep your handling tools and room light switch on the wall just inside the door. You don't want to cross the room in the dark to turn the lights on, and then step on something (alive) that wasn't supposed to be there!

OTHER SAFETY MEASURES

■ Label all cages with species and # of specimens. Such labels should contain the scientific name, as common names can be misleading to a toxicologist treating an exotic snakebite; e.g. 1.1 Saw-scale viper-*Echis carinatus pyramidium*

■ DO keep a posted list of emergency numbers in case of an accident. If possible, have a phone installed in your snake room.

■ NEVER pick up (freehandle) a venomous snake with your bare hands.

■ NEVER work with hot reptiles while drunk, high on drugs or feeling unwell. 80% of captive bites occur when someone who's hammered goofs-up.

■ ALWAYS keep cages and room door locked when not in immediate use. And never leave your keys out or loan them. Hide a spare set.

■ DON'T involve inexperienced persons in handling hot snakes.

■ BE DISCREET! Be selective who you speak to about them.

This list could go on, but most of it involves common sense. Keep your head about you, learn to "read" your snakes and hopefully all will be happy in Herpville! Part 2 will focus on tools for handling venomous snakes. Untill next time- be safe and "Happy hooking!"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Phelps, T.- *Poisonous Snakes*.(1981) Blandford Press, London. (A novice's Bible. A must, excellent!)

Mehrtens, J.M.- *Living Snakes of the World In Colour* (1987) Sterling Publishing, New York (As above, with lots of Photos)

Spawls, S.& Branch, B.- *The Dangerous Snakes of Africa* (1995) Ralph Curtis Books, Florida. (If you love African hot snakes, this is THE book!)

Russell, F.E.,Phd.- *Snake Venom Poisoning* (1980) Scholium Int. Inc.,New York

Visser, J. & Chapman, D.S.-*Snakes and Snakebite* (1978) Purnell, Johannesburg, S.A. (These last two books are sure to cure a case of complacency. Real eye openers with excellent text, complete with graphic bite photos to make you think!)

