

# **A** BOUT HYBRIDS AND REPTILES AS COLOUR-CANARIES



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Lately, variants from the natural colour patterns of reptiles are being offered for sale in increasing numbers. The trend for this was started a few years ago in the USA. Presently you can obtain albinos of almost every species of snake, even hybrids are offered. In Orlando (USA) last year even 2-headed snakes were sold. I suspect that these developments will not end soon.

Lots of authors who have written about this topic before me, were mostly all negative. I will try to give, in this article, a positive view on this topic and I hope to start people thinking about it and shake loose some reaction.

In 1994 I started interbreeding different coloured *Elaphe guttata*. This yielded mixed colour patterns, which I found very interesting. I had read about this in a book by Eachern, *Keeping and Breeding Corn Snakes*. His second book, *A Colour Guide to Corn Snakes* was even more interesting. The photographs of the colour variants shown in this book, really touched me. There were also pictures of so called hybrids (*Elaphe guttata* interbred with *Lampropeltis getulus* and of *Elaphe guttata* interbred with *Pituophis melanoleucus*). I have not interbred snakes myself yet, but seeing as these books date back to 1991 you can safely assume that this has led to even more hybrids in the USA.


My efforts to interbreed with snakes yielded only negative criticism: these hybrids would not be natural and could not be returned to

nature, according to nature-conservatives. Everybody seemed to have a reason not to do interbreeding.

In 1994 the matter of keeping snakes was much more advanced than for example when the European Snake Society started. In the first editions of this LS we find stories of reptile keepers trying to breed the animals. When the first albinos were offered, they sold for very high prices. The first albino python would cost f 30.000,- or more and albino boa's were sold for as much as f 50.000,-. Nowadays the prices are a lot lower. Albino *Elaphe guttata* are sold for a reasonable price, pythons will cost f 300,- to f 500,- and albino boas are still dropping in price.

What is my point? Colour mutations are often worth a lot of money, because they are attractively coloured. You see them more frequently in TV-clips. The positive side we have all observed. The so-called "big audience" seems to have more interest in these fair coloured animals. This is also the road goldfish, canaries and other species travelled. Whether it was always a success, must be judged by everyone individually. In the 90's keeping reptiles has extended to being big business, where big US-based firms have taken the lead. At this time all kinds of light sources can be bought, specially adapted to the needs of reptiles. Also available are special heat-elements and lots of food-additives.

Because of all these developments, reptiles have become a full-blown pet group in the USA, and has a complete industry feeding off



it. The life span of most reptiles has lengthened greatly; breeding has become quite normal. I think that the natural colours have not made a big hit with the public, but albinos and the colour variants have interested a new generation of reptile lovers. This has also occurred in the aquarium and the bird world. Nowadays it is possible to keep alive corals and other marine-life in your living room, and new colour varieties of birds can be bought in every pet-store. In these fields, it was also commerce that created the conditions for the success of it all. It is even possible to obtain special food-fluids for colibries by mail.

I think that people are very sensitive to colours around them. The world we live in has nothing natural any more. Most of our pets are very far from what they were in nature, but this doesn't affect the quality of life they live. For reptiles it is (in my view) a good thing that they are worth quite a lot of money. Their chances to live have increased a lot because of that. You do not buy an animal that will cost a small fortune casually, while an animal worth a nickel can be replaced easily.

My question to the animal protectors is: What is it with hybrids and albinos? They are not 'robbed' from nature; this is not an issue. Also complicated rules like Cites are not necessary. They do not occur in the natural environment and they are not pitiful. It is pitiful to see animals 'yanked' out of their habitat and placed in shops' without any treatment against parasites. Hybrids and albino's will decrease the quest for these 'wild caught' animals, there is a constant request at local pet-shops in my neighbourhood for albino *guttata*. If this trend continues in the Netherlands, the repti-

le-smugglers will be out of business very soon and will not have to take the "very last" out of their natural environment.

Hybrids are, I think, a problem for a lot of governments. Which law applies? At this moment we have hybrids of *Elaphe* and *Lampropeltis* and of *Elaphe* and *Pituophis*. It is also possible to interbreed Australian pythons, as it is with *Python molurus molurus* and *Python molurus bivittatus* (albino). And last year at the 'snake-day' in Houten, there was a so-called *Python retica* for sale, which is the product of *Python reticulatus* and *Python molurus bivittatus*. I wonder under which Cites-law this Python falls. Those who want to have Cites-declaration have to pay. This is the way the government makes money on rare reptiles, while animal-conservationists fill their pockets with money donated after television programs with images of smugglers and bad keeping of snakes.

But it has to be recognised that millions of people around the world enjoy the keeping and maintenance of reptiles. Everyone who keeps reptiles, hears the phrase every now and then 'have you seen this or that on the Discovery Channel or the National Geographic Channel?' There had been a program on reptiles the evening before. Even people, who usually do not like reptiles, mostly fall for an albino specimen.

I'm not surprised about this anymore; we have done it to birds, fish, plants and even our own environment, so it was bound to also happen to reptiles. All these developments have lead to the acceptance of the general public, to the joy we have in keeping reptiles,





and the years of pleasure we have doing this. Lots of people only see reptiles on TV and hardly ever in their natural environment. This is not only due to their hidden way of life but also to the decreasing numbers, due to the widely known factors which cause this.

It is ironic, that area's with a lot of reptiles, are also the areas where the people live under poor conditions. The populations in these areas of the world need help, but often the help they get is devastating for the reptile population in the area. And it is an illusion to say: 'we will bring the reptiles back to that environment and release them.

In Thailand the first green Iguana's have been sighted, in Australia foreign reptiles have been released, with all the consequences that brings. Frog populations have been infected,



*Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta, albino.* Photo by: Marcel van der Voort.

probably by researchers. These are some of many mishaps, which we reptile-lovers have always pointed out. But albino's and hybrids fall outside these criticisms, as far as I'm concerned. They are here, that's a fact, and I can certainly understand that people love them and buy them. Maybe it is because of these animals that the terrarium business has experienced such a boom. Almost every month a new pet-store opens somewhere in the Netherlands, probably also in the rest of Europe. That's why I wrote this article. The trend has been set in the USA, and will probably come to Europe as well. I like change; it will appeal to the public. It is also a good side effect that albino's and hybrids reduce the capture of reptiles from the wild. This last category is, I'm afraid, bad. Chances of survival: the existence of many snake species is endangered, and some will become extinct. Some of these, we will never even know what they looked like or how they lived. Snake-lovers will have no knowledge of this and will never the less have a lot of pleasure in having and keeping snakes.

## LITERATURE

Lots of *Litteratura Serpentina* papers, some papers from *Het Terrarium*; TV programs and press releases.

Eachern, M., *Keeping and Breeding Corn Snakes*. Advanced Vivarium Systems, Lakeside.

Eachern, M., *A Color Guide to Corn Snakes*. Advanced Vivarium Systems, Lakeside.

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