



Q *We love to handle our snakes, but we would also like to breed them. Is it alright to handle snakes that we want to breed?*

This is a question that I'm frequently asked by concerned would-be breeders... and basically the answer is that handling them should not be a problem. However, there needs to be a balance and this balance has to be assessed on a case by case basis. For example, take a pair of carpet pythons that are both very placid and relaxed about being handled. Since handling causes little stress to the animals, indulging yourself with your pets will have little bearing on breeding results, as long as you leave them in peace for long enough to have some successful matings. Bear in mind that a sexually eager pair of carpet pythons might spend 2 to 4 hours going through preliminaries and then mate for 14 hours. A less eager pair might spend a couple of days making up their minds about each other and then mate for 12 hours or so at a time.

In the case of snakes that are nervous and uncomfortable about being handled, too much human-snake interaction can have a marked influence on breeding success. A stressed snake just wants to hide and feel safe, so mating is not on the agenda. If a nervous snake smells human on its potential partner it can also further suppress the mating response and even make one snake run away from the other.



Females become touchier when they start to grow eggs and show clear signs of distress when handled. They endeavour to protect themselves by holding the body taught and coiling their abdomen like the jungle carpet in this picture

Clearly in this case, it is best to handle the snakes as little as possible.

In practise, I have found that the majority of captive bred animals from commonly kept species don't mind a bit of handling during the breeding season. In fact, most males are oblivious to being handled and just want to get out of their cages to find a female. When you open the cage door, they are out quick as a flash, looking for love and will endlessly pace through your hands if given the chance. Females are a little touchier, especially when they are starting to grow follicles. Once the abdomen of a female starts to harden, they show clear signs of distress when handled and endeavour to protect their abdomens by holding the body taught. While some handling will have little impact, if you stress them too much they can reabsorb the developing follicles and you will lose the chance to breed your snakes for another year.

Consistent, successful breeding requires a certain amount of intimacy with your snakes, especially the females. In order to understand, how she is progressing with follicle and egg development you need to handle her occasionally. Likewise in order to introduce and separate the males from the females you need to handle them and inspect their condition. In general, we limit ourselves to this sort of necessary contact over the breeding season. During the rest of the year, we will handle our snakes as we choose, take them outside for a wander or a sun bask and generally enjoy them as whim may demand. I must confess I have a couple of favourites, such as Brutus my big Olive Python male that I handle more than others with no apparent ill effect. Brutus is an example of a snake that doesn't mind being handled and in the breeding season he only has one thing on his mind and I'm not one of them, no matter how I am interacting with him. Conversely, I have an albino carpet female called Destiny that I am very fond of too, but she is a bit more touchy and

this season showed great distress at being handled when full of developing eggs, so I decided to exercise self control and leave her in peace while breeding. She rewarded my patience with a belly full of perfect eggs that all hatched out a couple of months ago.

So, in a nutshell, what constitutes too much handling during the breeding season varies from snake to snake and is a matter of judgement. Males are more tolerant than females undergoing egg development. Some handling is necessary to check your animals and to introduce and separate them over the breeding season, but as long as you are conservative and sensitive to their mood, some handling is not a problem for healthy, captive raised animals. Worthy of note is that recently a number of wild caught animals have been exported from Western Australia. Snakes with this sort of background, or that are only first generation captive bred animals can be much more touchy and difficult to care for and breed than multigenerational captive bred animals. It is worth bearing in mind that the shorter the captive history of a breeding line typically the more difficult it is to breed and the more sensitive to human intervention.

Do you have a question for Doc Rock?

If you have any questions you would like Doc Rock to answer, please send them to:

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