



**T**he hobby of keeping and breeding reptiles in Australia is rapidly growing and many new enthusiasts have expressed their frustration to me that despite the mass of information that abounds in print media and places like the internet, it can still be very difficult to get straightforward answers to even quite basic questions. Reptiles Australia has agreed to make “Ask Doc Rock” a regular column where readers can write in to the magazine and have some of their questions answered.

For this first column, I've chosen a question that was recently emailed to me at Southern Cross Reptiles and which I have answered countless times over the last decade or so ....

**Q** *Is it alright to keep snakes of the same species or even different species together?*

**A** First, let's consider keeping snakes of the same species together. The simple answer to the question is “yes you can”, but there are some important considerations.

Snakes of the same species can and will eat each other given the right circumstances. It is very risky putting snakes together that significantly differ in size. This risk is increased during the peak of the feeding season (typically spring/summer) and after periods of fasting. In my experience, the younger the snakes the more prone they are to making a meal of each other and the less the size differential required for a predatory response. The accompanying photograph shows the result of two hatchling Darwin carpet pythons that were temporarily kept together. They were of similar size and after the larger one ate its cage mate they both died.

Another consideration is the compatibility of the snakes being put together. Even if they are of similar size, one snake may be more timid than the other and so one will dominate. This is not uncommon and can have serious implications for the health of the more submissive indi-

vidual. Typically the dominant animal will occupy the most desirable areas of the cage denying the other snake sufficient access to the basking site or hide box leaving it stressed and thermally compromised. The submissive snake will often stop eating and eventually become ill. Recently,

we sold a lovely pair of young Topaz womas to a new customer who contacted us after a few months because the male had become gravely ill. Careful questioning revealed that initially they were kept separately and had thrived but later, due to space constraints, they had been moved



Keeping hungry young snakes together can have disastrous results. The yearling Darwin Carpet Python pictured above killed and swallowed one of its siblings only to die shortly afterwards itself.

into the same cage. The slightly larger female had dominated the male and excluded him from the basking site so that within 6 weeks the male had stopped eating and had a serious respiratory infection.

Womas and black-headed pythons are probably the worst candidates for caging together. Both of these species belong to the Genus *Aspidites* which are known reptile eaters. We always strongly recommend that they be kept singly. Imagine being locked in a cage with another human that offered no interaction other than to dominate you while occupying the best part of the cage, and that you sensed would put you on their dinner menu if you weren't careful. Life would definitely be stressful!!

Compatibility can change with the seasons too. Two male snakes might cohabitate quite happily for most of the year and then as spring comes around tear each other apart. I have received many an email over the years from folk that have happily kept a couple of carpet pythons together until one day they come home and there has been a fight resulting in serious damage to one or both snakes. Sometimes people think they have a breeding pair of snakes which can be safely left together only to find out too late that they were sexed incorrectly and one male has terminally injured the other male.

Undeniably, some snakes will live very happily together sharing the amenities of their cage without problem. The point is that if snakes are to be kept together you either need to put them in a large cage with multiple basking and hide sites so they have full access to their environmental

needs and can escape any aggressive overtures from cage mates, or you have to watch them very closely to ensure that one snake is not stressed or dominated to the point of ill health or physical injury.

It is difficult to keep accurate records when snakes of similar species and size are kept together. For example, if you have been very busy or away from home for a few days, it can be hard to determine which snake has shed and so keep an eye on the shed cycle. Also, you can't keep a track of when each of the snakes are defecating and so determine that their bowels are working properly or, if there is a smelly mess, which snake might have an intestinal problem. Records are a very important part of reptile keeping and good records are critical to good husbandry practise and the early detection of problems.

Finally, when keeping snakes together the most dangerous period is feeding time. In a large cage if the snakes are far enough apart, it is possible to feed them in opposite corners, but they should never be left unattended. All it takes is for one snake to finish its meal quickly and then wander over to the other snake and you can have a potentially explosive or even fatal situation on your hands. Even with constant supervision things can get out of hand very quickly. I strongly recommend that if you are going to keep snakes together separate them when feeding. This can be easily done by leaving one in the cage and moving the more confident animal(s) to a plastic rubbish bin(s) to be fed.

Keeping different species of snake together is even more fraught with

risk and I would recommend very strongly against it. It's a bit like locking a ferret in a cage with a cat or a cat with a dog. They are all mammals but they are also all predators and given the right stimulation the larger would be capable of making a meal of the smaller. If you want to scare a carpet python, try putting it in a cage which has housed a black-headed python. Likewise try putting a Children's python into a carpet python cage – once they smell the owner you can see their strong desire to exit the container.

In summary, we never keep more than one snake in a cage because of the risks inherent in keeping solitary predators together and because of the difficulty in keeping accurate records. The only exception to this is the mating season when boys and girls have other pressing matters on their minds. If you do decide to keep multiple snakes together in a confined area, then you need to keep a close eye on them.

*Do you have a question for Doc Rock?*

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

[docrock@reptilesaustralia.com.au](mailto:docrock@reptilesaustralia.com.au)

or write to:

Doc Rock Questions  
PO Box 4499  
Knox City VIC 3152