



**Q:** *What sort of things are important when buying a python? Also, when it comes to keeping and breeding, is there much of a difference between wild caught and captive bred animals?*

**A:** The questions above were asked by a new reptile hobbyist a few months ago and initially I didn't think much about it and so left them on the back-burner. However, a recent debate on one of the internet forums made me realise that there are many reptile enthusiasts that don't have the benefit of twenty years hindsight in the hobby and so don't know what most of us "old timers" now take for granted.

If we go back to the late eighties and early nineties in Australia, the hobby of herpetoculture (keeping and breeding reptiles) was much smaller than today. Although the animals being traded between keepers were supposed to be captive bred, most were wild caught. History through this period taught us that keeping and breeding wild caught pythons is a lot more difficult than propagating captive bred animals. Wild caught pythons tend to suffer greater anxiety in captivity than captive bred ones and so are more prone to stress related problems, especially infections (skin, mouth, lungs, intestine). Because snakes are an ancient group and near the top of the food chain, they are subject to the attentions of a large number of internal parasites. It is very difficult through drugs to completely

remove these unwanted guests and in a captive environment many can become lethal (e.g. coccidia, entamoeba, trichomonas). Feeding wild caught animals can also be fraught with frustration and is often far more difficult than with captive raised snakes. As a consequence of this (and less husbandry knowledge), around twenty years ago captive snakes did not have the survivability and reproductive success we enjoy today. Also at this time, the financial reward from dealing in reptiles was nowhere near as great and people often were happy to just swap animals if they were lucky enough to breed them.

During the first half of the nineties, the occasional clutch of eggs from wild caught animals gradually added to the captive bred stock and these in turn dramatically improved survivability and reproductive success. Consequently, over the last 15 years the hobby rapidly expanded and the amount of money from selling reptiles also escalated markedly.

Keeping this history in mind, the first question you should ask yourself when buying a python is why do you want it. There are two main reasons most people buy a snake, as a pet to observe and enjoy or because they want to try and breed the animal and ultimately sell/trade the offspring. To

my thinking, while some of the issues are the same there are some notable differences in "what sort of things are important" when considering these two quite different purposes.

When buying a python, no matter what the reason, the first requirement is a healthy snake that feeds well and is growing normally. You want an animal that carries no disease; a snake that has no endo- or ectoparasites; no skin, mouth, lung or gut infections; has suffered no kidney damage from dehydration; and is not subject to any shedding problems. Typically the older the animal you are buying the greater the risk, especially if not from captive stock. So, you may need to ask yourself why someone is selling a perfectly good, healthy, adult python. There are many valid reasons, but most of us tend to hold onto quality adult snakes that are performing well. On the other hand, quite often keepers are more than happy to pass on a problem.

It is very difficult to avoid these potential pitfalls with certainty even with 20 years of experience. It takes an intimate knowledge of an animal to be confident and to understand its overall health and captive performance. This is knowledge that only its keeper can possess and so buying



a snake from another requires trust and a leap of faith.

Selecting the right snake becomes even more critical when you are acquiring breeding stock. If your motivation is simply to buy a pet, then as long as it is disease free and will feed often enough to stay healthy you will probably be happy. But if you are buying a snake to become a breeder, you will want it to be more than just healthy, you want it to thrive in captivity (especially a female) and to be sexed correctly. Since you are intending to produce offspring for sale, you want your snake to have the right genetics (e.g. colour and pattern, performance in captivity, hatchling feeding response etc.) to make your job easier and the progeny desirable. One additional factor to look out for (it caught me out years ago) is knowing the true age of a snake. Snakes, unlike mammals, remain small if their food is limited. Eventually, this can lead to permanent stunting. Consequently, if a python doesn't eat well in captivity, an adult snake of many years can end up the same size as say a healthy 18 month old and be sold as such – but it will never become a proper sized breeding adult.

So, where is this all leading? The bottom line is that when you buy a snake the single most important factor is whether or not you can trust the seller. If you are just buying a snake as a pet you can take more risk because at worst you will only lose your money. However, if you are buying to breed you will be investing years of your time and effort into your animals, plus you are risking lost income (and fun and satisfaction). We all love to get a bargain, but remember to weigh up what's at stake.

So, the following are my five recommendations when buying a snake:-

**1)** Buy from someone you know you can trust, or who comes well recommended from someone you trust. If important, can they sex accurately? Pictures may be useful, but remember they are easily manipulated. (We have found pictures stolen from our web site to sell someone else's snakes on line!) A good breeder will know more about how a hatch-

ling will turn out than any picture will show.

**2)** Unless you have lots of experience, stay with multigenerational captive bred stock from quality blood lines. Avoid repeating the lessons already learnt over the last 20 years.

**3)** If possible, buy young animals and grow them up yourself so that they develop as you want them and so you avoid inheriting the problems of others.

**4)** Be clear in your own mind the reason for purchasing the animal and the appropriate balance in risk/return for your circumstances – e.g. pet, breeding stock, rarity, desirability of colour/pattern, disease risk and consequences, price, seller's credentials.

**5)** And finally try and avoid impulse buying or throwing caution to the wind. I know that sometimes an excellent opportunity might require rapid response, but remember you'll have a lot more time afterwards to regret your decision...

In conclusion, even after decades with reptiles and breeding countless animals, I still find few things in life that are as enjoyable as opening a package to examine a new, highly anticipated reptile addition to our collection. I hope these thoughts help some of you experience this greatest of pleasures.

*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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