THE DWARF ANGOLAN PYTHON, *PYTHON ANCHIETAE*: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES.

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Africa's rich and diverse snake fauna contains relatively few boids. Four species of sand boa (*Eryx*) inhabit the arid northern areas (although they are absent from the inhospitable tracts of wind-blown sand in the central Sahara). Of similar stout appearance is the Calabar ground python (*Calabaria reinhardtii*), but it is a denizen of the central rain forest belt, extending from Liberia to the Congo, reaching east almost to Lake Kivu. Although commonly called a 'python' the taxonomic affinities of this poorly-known snake remain enigmatic. McDowell (1975) considers it a much modified burrowing derivative of the royal python. However, Underwood (1977) places it in a separate subfamily, and considers that it retains the lifestyle of the ancestral boid stock and that it is a probable Gondwanaland relict. It has never been bred in captivity although there are reports of wild-caught gravid females laying eggs.

Of the three species of python found on the continent, the rarest and most localised is the Angolan Dwarf Python, *Python anchietae*. Since its description nearly one hundred years ago (Bocage, 1888) less than 40 specimens have been deposited in world museums. Even fewer have been held in captivity. In size, morphology and temperament it is closely related to the royal python (*Python regius*) of West Africa. However, it does not get as thickset in the body, and rarely exceeds 1.5 m in total length. Its most distinguishing features



Fig. 1. *Python anchietae*. Foto: W.R. Branch.



Fig. 2. *Python anchietae*. Foto: W.R. Branch.

are the numerous tuberculoid scales that cover the top of the head. The large head shields found on *Python sebae* and *Python regius* are represented in *Python anchietae* by only a single pair of internasals and prefrontals, and even these are separated along the mid-line by a double series of small scales. Prominent, triangular heat-sensitive pits occur on the rostral and first 5 upper labials. The body scales are relatively larger than in *Python sebae* and in 57-61 rows at mid-body.

Wild individuals feed on small mammals (e.g. Gerbils) and birds and in captivity readily take mice. They are gentle and inoffensive snakes, rarely biting, even when annoyed. They may on extreme provocation adopt a ball-shape similar to that of the royal python.

Very few specimens are held in captivity. Houston Zoo in Texas have had wild-caught adults for some years, whilst others were held at the Transvaal Snake Park in South Africa. The latter hatched from a wild-caught gravid female after 69-74 days incubation (Patterson and Erasmus, 1978). After many years of unsuccessful manipulation (Logan, 1973; Mengden et al., 1980) Houston Zoo have recently successfully bred their captives (McLain and Tryon, 1983). Five young were hatched from as many eggs after an incubation of 60-65 days. Factors responsible for the successful breeding seem to involve:

a. provision of a thermocline that reflected more natural conditions (21-32°C, 55% relative humidity);
b. separation and re-introduction of the sexes;
c. seasonal adjustments of the specimens to induce reproductive cycling.

Although like all other boids, *Python anchietae* is placed on Appendix 2 of CITES legislation, it is nevertheless felt that this species requires fuller protection. It is in great demand in the pet trade and this undoubtedly led to the recent theft of both captive born *Python anchietae* from the Transvaal Snake Park. A recommendation has been made to the Namibian Nature Conservation authorities that steps be initiated to place this species on Appendix I of CITES.

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