MATURITY AGE.

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Maturity age (or reproductive age) is the age at which an animal becomes able to reproduce. It is difficult to determine when maturity is reached. That animals are mature, can in fact only be proven by laboratory research, (in which for instance sperm is found in the male). Such research has actually been done on some species, but it is clear that this cannot be done on a large scale (Petzold, 1984). In practice maturity of reptiles can be determined more easily by observations on animals which are in captivity from early youth onwards.
Yet, even this is not easy. Many animals exhibit 'mating behaviour' long before they actually reach maturity. This is for instance the case with *Emys* (a mud turtle) from which mating efforts have been observed at the age of four weeks, and with *Testudo* at the age of eight weeks. On the other hand, maturity often can be reached long before there are any (observed) mating efforts.
In spite of these problems, herpetological observations have been such, that it has become possible to make pronouncements about the maturity age of many species.
In general, maturity has been proven to correspond with body length in the first place.
For snakes, many data are available, though these are mostly based on incidental captivity experiences, which can not be generalized too hastily. The length of the specimen concerned is seldom given in these reports. In this context, it is significant that even on the forms which are made available by Litteratura Serpentium for the compo-

sition of breeding reports, there is a question on the age of the parents, but not their length, though actually length determines maturity. This fact explains the differences in age of reported mature specimens: not every snake grows at the same pace.

With *Boa constrictor* the first mating efforts were noticed at the age of 29 months in the Zürich Zoo. The animals then measured 1.5 to 1.8 m. For the Rock python (*Python sebae*) in 'African Wildlife' a an age of 10 to 15 years is given. For the reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*) a body length of over 5 m is needed for maturity, which explains why there is so little breeding of this species in captivity. More breeding results (almost too many!) have been produced with the Burmese python (*Python molurus bivitttatus*), which reaches maturity at a lesser length than *Python reticulatus*.

There are many data available about the maturity of rattle snake species. For instance, northern species are known in general to need more time to become mature than southern species, which can be related to the fact that northern species grow less rapidly as a result of lower temperatures. In general, it can be stated that rattle snakes reach maturity at about two thirds of their maximum length.

It is also known that young animals that are fed through the winter period and are kept at constant summer temperatures, compared with specimens that are allowed to hibernate, not only grow faster, but consequently also become mature earlier. Captive born *Thamnophis elegans* (a garter snake species), when fed during the winter, reach a length of 53-59 cm (the average adult length) after eight months, and also become sexually mature at this age.

In summary, it can be stated that maturity in snakes primarily corresponds with the length of the animal, and that age plays only a minor role.

It would be advisable then, to mention in breeding reports the length of the parents as well as their age.

REFERENCES

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