

THE IMPORTANCE OF BREEDING PROGRAMS FOR THE BREEDING OF SNAKES

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For some time now articles and summons on the use of breeding programs and pedigrees have been appearing in herpetocultural magazines. Within the Dutch Tortoise Society (NSV) the breeding of several tortoise species and subspecies is being recorded by a so-called 'bookkeeper.' Also within Lacerta, the society for terraria and herpetology, breeding programs are used. For a better understanding of the importance of these programs for our hobby I will give a short explanation what these programs are about and how they work.

When breeding according to a breeding program the so called 'bookkeeper' keeps track of which animals are crossed with each other. He also registers all breeding results of a number of breeders. Through a thorough registration of all breeding animals the bookkeeper can determine the most ideal couples and avoid any undesirable crosses. In this way it is possible to maintain a healthy population of certain species or subspecies in captivity. This has a number of big advantages, the biggest being the fact that in the future hardly any animals will have to be imported from the wild. The only justification would be the introduction of 'fresh' blood into a breeding group. By establishing contacts with foreign breeders the number of species kept can even be increased.

Of course there are a number of disadvantages in starting these breeding programs. First of all the success of the system depends on the willingness of the breeders to participate in such a program. They will have to be prepared to lend animals for breeding attempts and to (continuously) inform their bookkeeper about their transactions and any offspring. Especially the lending of their own animals will for most people be the major problem in actively participating in a breeding program. Also housing other peoples animals could theoretically present problems because of contagious diseases. The risk of attracting diseases by exchanging animals can not be denied. However, assuming that one does not attempt to breed with diseased animals, these will not be exchanged and thus the risk will be minimal. Of course an unhealthy animal can escape its keepers attention and still be exchanged. This risk however is many times smaller then when commercially traded animals are introduced into your collection.

One of the major tasks of the bookkeeper is a thorough registration of all transactions so no animals will 'get lost' and they can eventually return to their rightful owners. One problem encountered in this is the individual recognition of the different animals. How do you keep your animals apart and how do you know at any time which animal belongs to whom? Possibly photographs and/or drawings of distinct and aberrant patterns can assist in the recognition of individual animals.

Furthermore a bookkeeper can be a source of information for those who wish to obtain more information on those (sub)species the bookkeeper is in charge of. For newly started snake keepers he can be an easy accessible source of information and can also point out where to obtain offspring animals.

When these breeding programs function well, prices of offspring animals will be able to go down considerably due to the greater offer. This has the additional advantage that the commercial trade can be competed out.

A final though not less important point is the following: given the present-day developments in legislation concerning the keeping of pet animals it is of utmost importance that towards the legislator the keeping of snakes is presented as a serious and well organized hobby. By being open and giving a clear insight in all species that are kept and bred any possible 'positive list' is likely to be more favourable then when our hobby remains in an atmosphere of dark 'back-rooms.' Well organized breeding programs and regular reports on results and progress will certainly contribute to this. If we do not succeed in convincing the right authorities that a great number of species can be kept without too many difficulties, the number of species that we are legally allowed to keep might be reduced considerably in the future.

Since snake keepers can not stay behind in an active participation in recent developments within the world of terraria I think that all snake keepers, including those that are not a member of the ESS, should be able to take part. In the end our main concern should be for the animals and not about the society.

Because we would like the programs to start as soon as possible our aim for now is a beginning on a small scale basis. Later, if things are working well, the number of species can be increased according to the system then in use. In this way any weaknesses in the system can be spotted and improved. Because of their relative ease in which they can be bred and their low price a number of *Thamnophis* and *Elaphe* species seem ideal to start with.

Already a number of persons have agreed to cooperate. It would be fantastic when for a number of species enough people would sign up so a registration could be set up during this year and things could get seriously underway next breeding season! Mister H. Zwartepoorte, the man who came up with the original idea of breeding programs and who is an employee of the Blijdorp Zoo in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, has agreed to organize a meeting in the spring of 1994 (most likely in March). During this day the use and maintenance of the programs and their backgrounds will be explained.

Hopefully you have become convinced of the importance of breeding programs for the continuation of our hobby. They are not only of direct advantage for the snakes but certainly also for the breeders. If you want more information or if you are interested to participate in such a breeding program, be it as a coordinator or as a breeder (or both) please contact me as soon as possible at the address mentioned above.