

A SAFE SYSTEM TO KEEP VENOMOUS SNAKES

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MOTTO

'Whoever keeps venomous snakes will run the risk of being bitten by one of his animals at one time or another and an examination of the literature shows us that many people talk about this experience with pride, rather than - for instance - shame because of the carelessness and the underestimation involved' (Sparreboom, 1980, page 213-214).

INTRODUCTION

This is a no scientific discussion about the captive care of venomous snakes. I rather wish to inform the readers about my experiences with an alternative terrarium system for venomous snakes, than the traditional one. The traditional systems incorporate sash-windows and a lock at the front side of the terrarium.

Sufficient articles have already appeared about the dangers and risks of keeping venomous snakes in general, though not about practical experiences, how it could be done in a more safe way. Nevertheless there is a need for it. The number of venomous snake keepers increases every year, as one can see on the 'Snakeday'. I myself have experienced how difficult it is to find a serious venomous snake who also tries to deal with his animals in a safe and responsible way. In my opinion the traditional system is unsuitable and perilous for the keeping of venomous snakes, especially for beginners.

I started by reading a lot of literature on venomous snakes and also about the dangers of keeping them. I also read about the accidents people had whilst keeping venomous snakes, including those of some very well known, experienced herpetologists who had handled these animals for many years.

Subsequently I talked to people who kept venomous snakes. Most of them kept the animals in traditional terraria and sometimes there were several cobra's or mamba's in one terrarium. Often the owner was proud on his heroic experiences with these animals and when they had been bitten, they told about this with much bravado.

The opinion of the venomous snake keepers who kept their snakes 'in the traditional way' was often that I was 'very afraid' to do it in their way. Personally, I believe that you always have to realize that you are dealing with dangerous animals with which you can not be careful enough, both for yourself and those around you. Every venomous snake keeper should handle his animals as little as possible outside the terrarium.

Because of my negative view on the keeping of snakes in the traditional way, I have tried to introduce a new system, so that the keeping of these beautiful and interesting animals cannot be criticized. Hopefully I will be able to make it clear that there is a serious and safe way to keep and breed venomous snakes.

My system is inspired by a drawing in Thiemes Terrariumgids, page 23, fig. 3. In the execution of this system I have made a few changes, after which I have started to keep venomous snakes.

PROBLEMS OF A TRADITIONAL TERRARIUM

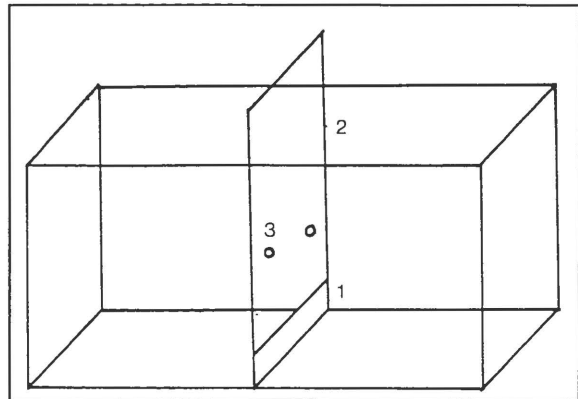
If one works in the traditional way, the snakes often lay close to the water bowl. One could therefore decide not to clean the terrarium, because it gets too 'risky', as the traditional keepers tell themselves. This of course is not good for hygiene. When the terrarium has sash-windows at the front you also get a kind of Russian roulette: will the snake strike or won't it!

It will be clear that in this way there is a major risk that accidents may happen. When such information reaches the press, venomous snake-keeping in general gets a bad name.

In 'Het Terrarium' (vol. 11.5) for example, there was a suggestion how to put a venomous snake safely in a bucket with a plastic strip when you want to clean the terrarium or work in it for any other purpose. Using my system the animals never leave the terrarium. Cleaning the terrarium is done in two stages: first one side and then the other. Thanks to a special sliding window, which is described further on, the animals never get into contact with the person who takes care of them. It seems to me that my system is much safer.

MY SYSTEM

As can be seen in figure 1 my system is based on a terrarium that can be separated into two independent compartments with one simple movement of a sash window. When the slide is put down, it rests on a threshold. I have put in this threshold to be 100% sure that the slide is really closed. Without the threshold, sawdust for instance could get underneath the slide and this way some animals could get the chance to crawl underneath it. The material for the slide and the threshold, and possibly for the complete terrarium, is transparent plexiglass, because there are a lot of snake species that may want to attack when you are working in the terrarium. By accident you could push with a snake hook against the glass, or a snake could break the glass when it strikes. You can prevent this by using the stronger plexiglass. The opening is at the top of the terrarium and the illumination and heating can be placed outside the terrarium, so that one doesn't have to work inside the terrarium, not even for changing a light bulb.

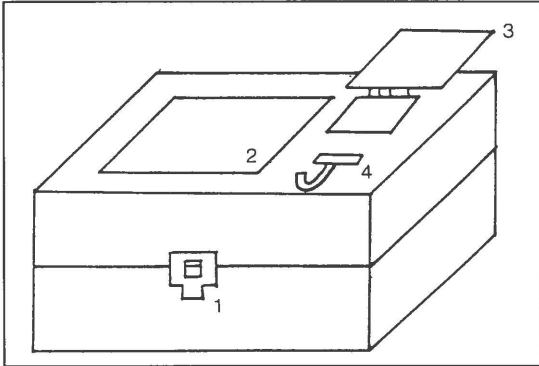


1: threshold, 2: sash-window (closed), 3: holes to secure the slide with for example pins.

I adapt the measurements of the terrarium to the snake species that is to be housed in it. The decoration is a matter of personal taste, but to the interest of both safety and

hygiene I keep the decoration simple. At one side of the terrarium there is a water bowl; at the other side a hiding-box.

I use hide boxes of different sizes. In the lid of the box I cut a hole just big enough to let the snake through. On to that hole a hinged flap is attached, which can be secured with a little bolt. I can open the box in two different ways: the normal way for inspection and to change the tissues I use to absorb any possible faeces (no. 1 in Fig 2), and with the flap used to lock up the snake (no. 3 in Fig 2). Next to the flap there is a piece of plexiglass through which I can observe the snakes without having to open the box.



1: normal shutting of the box; 2: plexiglass plate; 3: valve; 4: bolt for the valve.

From my own experience I have noticed that a snake is sometimes unaware of the fact that work is being done in the terrarium. Additionally, 90% of all the snakes crawl into the box voluntarily. The only thing that is left to do is to open the terrarium at one side, after which the flap can be closed with a snake hook and the bolt can be shut. In this way one can work safely.

With my system the only contact is the remaining 10%, when the animals are not inside the box, but lay, for example, by the water bowl.

It is easy to pick up the snake with a hook and put it in the other side of the terrarium, after which the slide is put down. This is the only moment that I come into contact with the animals.

The advantage of this is that you can work in a relaxed manner and that the animals suffer less stress and that all risks are reduced. It is very important that you never get suddenly confronted with the snake, so panic situations don't occur. It is superfluous to say that I only keep one snake in each two-part terrarium. The sometimes misleading 'head counting', necessary before you can start any work in the terrarium can be eliminated in my system.

I have been using this system for four years. I started with vipers and rattlesnakes and at the moment I also own several cobra species. The system fully satisfies my demands.

For arboreal snake species I have yet another variety, one that I am still testing. Again I use the sliding system. My husbandry techniques are also perfectly suited for non-venomous snake species and even spiders and scorpions can be safely kept in this way.

I hope that this article inspires people to cooperate in designing safer ways of keeping venomous snakes, so that we can try to improve the bad name of venomous snake-keepers. Of course I am open to any constructive criticism.

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