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ENOMOUS SNAKES 2: TOOLS

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In this article I'll explain some of the tools and handling equipment used in the captive maintenance of venomous snakes. First of all, I would like to state that the tools mentioned here should be regarded as being absolutely necessary for handling venomous snakes. Individuals insisting on using their bare hands or even gloves are surely taken leave of their senses. They must be regarded as irresponsible and a danger not only to himself, but also to those around him and his fellow keepers.

SNAKE HOOKS

The universal tool for handling and pinning venomous snakes. Hooks consist of a rod or pole of various thickness and lengths which terminate with a 90 degree angle 'foot' or hook. The end is rounded to prevent injury to the animal and the top should have a rubber or wooden handle for optimum control. A good cheap source for these are golf clubs with the heads cut off and a 1/4-3/8" bent aluminium or steel rod welded to the end of the golf club shaft. Commercially made snake hooks are available, and can be ordered to size from various reptile dealers.

The keeper should have an assortment of different sizes and lengths of hooks to accommodate any size of snake. Popular lengths include 12-16" hooks fashioned from strong coat hanger wire or part of a fishing pole for neonates and juveniles, 24-36" for most medium sized snakes(2-3.5 ft.) and 36-48" for larger species. Personally, I find that any hook over 48" is rather cumbersome to use, and does not aid in speed of movement if necessary.

THE GRAB STICK

The grab stick, or Pilstrom tongs as they are generically referred to, is a mechanical grasping device intended for use in restraining large, fast or extremely aggressive snakes. These tongs consist of a 3/4" aluminium tube, 24-60" long, a pistol-type grip and lever similar to a bicycle brake and two 6" fingers at the bottom end which are connected to a long thin steel rod that is under spring tension. As opposed to lifting and guiding the snake with a hook, the jaws of the grab stick clamp onto snake(never in the neck region!) and prevent it from running. Great care must be exercised in using a grab stick, as most snakes react violently to something restraining them instead of simply being lifted, and can easily damage ribs, spine or internal organs. Fortunately, you can feel how much pressure is being applied to the snake and help to avoid injury. Personally, I feel that grab sticks are a little brutal and are only used as a last resort when a particularly fast or aggressive snake is getting dangerously out of control using hooks. I find they are much more useful for offering dead prey to large snakes and moving or taking out objects in the cage.

THE TRAP BOX

This simple but very effective control device greatly eases the day-to-day cage maintenance and stress on both the snake and keeper. It is basically a sealed hide box with a sliding Plexiglas or wooden door and a means to lock or secure the door shut when taken out of the cage. Trap boxes are generally reserved for large Elapidae or other snakes with berserk temperaments which cannot be easily control-



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led with hooks. Mind you, for the venomous snake keeper there is no safer method than the trap box. At this time there is no commercially made (yet!) trap box, so you'll have to construct it yourself. Be sure to use strong materials as you would when building a cage, and don't forget to drill a few small holes for ventilation while it's outside the cage.

FORCEPS

Every keeper of venomous reptiles should include long (16-24") forceps or locking haemostats for feeding dead prey to small to medium-sized snakes. They are commercially available from medical supply depots and most reptile dealers, and should be considered an absolute necessity. I personally know one bonehead who thought rattlesnakes couldn't strike straight up from a coiled position and promptly offered an adult mouse to a 3.5ft. Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) with his bare hand and was immediate-

ly bitten from a distance of 12" in the palm of his right hand with both fangs. Well, he almost died from his stupidity and to make us think him even more of a genius, three weeks later he was bitten again(!!!), this time by a Western Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*).

PLEXIGLAS SHIELD

Another tool which gets a lot of use in my reptile room are Plexiglas shields. These are simply pieces of Plexiglas in various sizes, screwed onto pieces of broom handle at various lengths. These are placed between the resting snake and you, so you can quickly grab a water bowl, uneaten rodent or scoop faeces without disturbing the snake or stressing it by constantly taking it out of the cage for maintenance.

Part 3 will discuss the methods and potential horrors of transporting venomous snakes. Take care for now.

