Boa Constrictor 101

For the purposes of this care sheet, we will focus primarily on the selection process and basic husbandry standards that must be met in order for you acquire and maintain a happy, healthy Boa Constrictor. We will not be talking about breeding in this article. This care sheet is intended for the more commonly kept Red Tail boas of the subspecies Boa c. constrictor (“BCC”, true red tail boas) and Boa c. imperator (“BCI”, Colombian, “CA BCI”, Central American). There are a few localities of B. c. imperator (Caulker Cay, Hogg Island, Corn Island, etc) which may require additional research, however, their general care requirements are still the same.

First and foremost, if you have not already done so, it is IMPERATIVE that you purchase a copy of this book. It will be your Boa Bible as you learn about your snake, and will go into far greater detail surrounding breeding and localities than we will during this guide. If you are serious about providing the highest quality care for your animal, and want to be taken seriously as a boa keeper/breeder, you MUST own and read a copy of this book! We cannot stress this enough!
What Kind of Boa Is Right For Me?

With so many types of boa constrictor, and so many people producing them, how will you know which one is right for you? First, determine whether owning ANY boa constrictor is right for you. Remember that boa constrictors can live for up to 30 years and can reach maximum lengths of anywhere between 4-12ft, with larger specimens being rare, but recorded. As with most snake species, Boa Constrictor males will stay smaller than females, on average by 6"-12". You MUST remember this when selecting a suitable cage since, contrary to some beliefs, snakes DO NOT only grow to the size of their enclosures. Rather, maximum size in boas is determined by subspecies and locality, with “dwarf boas” staying smallest (sexually mature females reaching 5-6’ max) and true red tails being the longest (we have a Suriname red tail that is 10 years old and just shy of 8 feet). While Colombian b. c. imperator don’t get as long as their true red tail cousins, they will often have a larger girth. Obviously, the bigger the snake, the bigger the cage, the bigger the meals, the more $$$.

Having said that, do NOT think that *all* dwarf boas will be the best of both worlds! MOST dwarf boas are labeled merely as “Central American”, and these along with those from the Nicaraguan locality have what we like to call “little dog syndrome”. What they lack in size they MORE than make up for in attitude!! It is for this reason that BioFauna Exotics includes temperaments for each available baby in its info sheet. Seasoned keepers are more than capable of training a feisty snake to be calm enough for everyday handling or even educational programs, but newer owners **should not attempt** this unless they have someone to teach them. There is a fine line between teaching it trust/tolerance and stressing out your new boa, regardless of your tolerance for being a human pin cushion.

Selecting Your Boa:

Once you have decided the locality of boa that best suits your skill level and financial & housing constraints for the lifetime of the snake, it is time to look for your new boa! If at all possible, it is best to purchase a snake that you can see and hold in person. Pictures are worth a thousand words, but nothing can compare to seeing the animal for yourself and determining the animal’s health and quality. When selecting a boa in person, you are looking for a vibrant animal on all accounts. When picked up, determine the following:

- Is the tongue actively flicking? Searching?
- Are the eyes alert? Clear? If the animal is in shed, this may be harder to notice since it is normal for the eyes to become cloudy/blue (hence the term “going blue”), but be sure that the eyes are clear of “debris” (stuck shed on eyecaps) and that they are not sunken in (the animal is dehydrated).
- Is the animal holding its head/body naturally? The boa should be able to hold its head and body with ease and grace. If you see wobbling/jerking/abnormal posture (upside down), this can be a sign of life threatening birth defects or contagious illnesses that could potentially affect your entire collection!
- What is the body condition of the boa? Boa constrictors are, well, **constrictors**, and should have impeccable muscle tone. When holding the snake, you should feel its power, even at an early age. No sagging skin, no visible spine, no limpness. If purchasing an adult, the animal should not be obese either!! This can be a sign of poor feeding habits or even “power feeding” (more on that in the feeding section).
- Does the snake tolerate being handled? Or is it adamantly about being put back/flighty? While this may not be a sign of a sick animal, this will give you a short insight into this animal’s personality and how much work you may have ahead of you if you intend to have a “puppy dog tame” boa.
• **REMEMBER:** It is perfectly normal for baby boas to be slightly defensive. They think you are going to eat them!! Remember to stay calm, move slowly, and avoid overhead motions for the front 1/3 of the snake when handling scared babies.

Lastly, before you purchase your new boa, always ask the following questions from the seller. This is exponentially important if you don’t have the opportunity to see the snake in person (i.e. you found an ad online).

1. **What is the snake’s DOB?**
   1. You need to know how old the snake is in order to judge if it is being fed properly (underfed boas will be a lot smaller than they should be for their age, but don’t mistake that for pure locality dwarf boas!)
   2. You need to know how old the snake is if you intend to breed it
   3. If the seller produced the snake and doesn’t know this info, they are not a trustworthy breeder.

2. **Who produced this snake?**
   1. It is preferable to purchase a boa directly from the original breeder, but if that is not the case, the seller should know who they bought it from. If they don’t, this could mean trouble down the road if you intend to breed your boa since you won’t know for sure what kind it is.
   2. Knowing the original breeder can also give you more insight into the snake than the seller himself might be able to provide. This could mean an increase or a decrease in value for your boa. This is especially important to know if you are purchasing high end morphs or hard to find locality boas and need to be 100% sure of the snake’s genetics or locality for breeding purposes.
   3. Knowing the original breeder can also help you determine the quality of the boa without even holding it in your hands. Certain breeders are, unfortunately, notorious for unjust breeding practices like power feeding, selling sick animals, etc. so you can save yourself a lot of heartache by knowing in advance.

3. **What is this snake eating and when did it last eat?**
   1. This information is INVALUABLE! The best breeders will not only be able to provide this information, but they will be able to give you a complete copy of their “cage card” with all activity on that animal prior to the date of sale. This will ensure that your new boa is already an established feeder on frozen/thawed prey items. While it is certainly not a requirement for your baby boa to be eating frozen/thawed, if you are not experienced in transitioning baby boas from live to frozen, this can be an issue. Live food can do significant harm to your snake in its natural defense to fight back. Read more about this in the section below.
   2. Knowing when the snake last ate can tell you how reliably the snake is eating. If the seller claims that the snake is eating frozen mouse hoppers, but hasn’t eaten for a month, something is wrong. Either the snake is underfed, or the snake is refusing food for some reason- and it’s not YOUR job to spend hundreds of dollars to play detective.

**Housing/Husbandry:**
It is incredibly important that you purchase the caging for your snake BEFORE you purchase your snake! This will allow you to do a “test run” with your bells and whistles to make sure that your temperature and humidity levels are optimal for keeping these snakes. While the care for boas can be seen as relatively “easy”, your success as a reptile keeper for *any* species relies almost entirely on the environment you are creating for your pet. Boas are no different!

Boas require an ambient temperature between 78-82 degrees Fahrenheit with a basking spot of about 90. Boas should be maintained with a relative humidity of around 60% to ensure optimum shedding conditions. If temperature and humidity levels are not met, this *will* result in health issues for your boa including, but not limited to, upper respiratory infections and problems shedding or digesting meals. So again, having your caging set up prior to the arrival of your new boa will ensure a transition into your home with the least amount of stress for you AND your snake.

Based on the above husbandry conditions, we at BioFauna Exotics STRONGLY argue against the use of glass tanks for your boa! It is very hard to maintain the proper levels of heat and humidity in an aquarium, and more often than not, they do not allow enough space for the boa to roam. Purchasing PVC cages or building a cage of your own are the best options for these snakes to make sure they are happy throughout their lives. Your boa should be able to completely stretch out inside its cage for the cage to be big enough. Most boas are usually kept in 6’ x 2’ x 2’ enclosures to be comfortable, with exception to large BCCs. Heating can be supplied using Flexwatt, radiant heat panels (RHPs), or the use of a ceramic heat emitting bulb (Vision cages, for example, have built in holders for these). If building your own cage, ensure that your snake cannot burn itself. Heat sources **SHOULD NOT** be used without a Rheostat (similar to a dimmer) or a thermostat to make sure your snake does not burn itself. Again, having your cage set up in advance allows you to make these adjustments before endangering your snake. If using bulbs mounted inside the cage, it is often best to install a “bulb cage” to prevent them from having access to the bulb. This is especially important for snakes that like to climb! This can prevent dangerous thermal burns which could potentially kill your pet!

As tempting as it can be, we STRONGLY advise against housing more than one boa together in the same enclosure unless they are breeding. There are countless stories of boas consuming each other or harming each other. Additionally, you want to be able to keep track of each snake’s day to day activities to know if they are acting abnormally. If you constantly house more than one boa together, and you notice blood in your cage, you want to immediately know which animal it came from and why. Furthermore, it will make feeding your animals significantly easier since you NEVER want to feed more than one animal in the same enclosure at the same time! More on this in the feeding section.

**Handling Your Boa:**

Believe us, we know how exciting it is to get a new snake! However, here are some general guidelines to follow to make sure you don’t stress out your new snake and/or cause any potential health issues.

- When your new boa first arrives, set him/her up in their new cage and let it settle in for about 2 weeks before you attempt to handle it with any frequency. It may take that long for your new boa to become acclimated to his/her new home. With the exception of handling for cleaning, you should not attempt to handle for any prolonged length of time during this acclimation period.
- **NEVER** attempt to handle your boa within 48hrs of being fed! Unless it is an absolute emergency, it is not recommended to do so since it may result in your boa regurgitating
the still undigested meal, causing stress to the animal and potential health problems as a result. Boas are most sensitive to digestion during this time.

- Begin handling sessions by holding for 5-10min, 1-2 times per week. If your boa tolerates these sessions well, you will easily be able to increase the duration and frequency. Baby boas will let you know when they have had enough by either trying to flee, becoming restless, or becoming defensive. DO NOT ignore these signs as it may cause undue stress on your new baby.

- You’ll often hear from pet stores how you should feed snakes in a separate feeding container to prevent the snake from getting aggressive. This is not necessary. In fact, we recommend against this practice. As per the above statement of not handling your animal within 48 hours of feeding, this would not be possible using the separate container feeding method. Secondly, snakes are often still hungry for hours after consuming a meal and this could result in you being bit by a still hungry boa constrictor. If you’d like to avoid being bitten by a feeding response, it’s simple. Invest in a snake hook and use it to gently stroke the animal’s back or hook the snake gently and pull it towards you. This will show the snake that it is not being fed and it should be prepared to be handled. This is what we call “hook training” and is a good way to desensitize snakes and avoid accidental bites without stressing the snake shortly after feeding. This is a quintessential practice for boas (or ANY snake) with a very high feed response.

**Feeding Your Boa:**

There is a lot of debate surrounding how often to feed and how large of a meal that should be fed. Some sites suggest feeding an “appropriately sized meal” every 7-10 days, some say a large meal every 2 weeks, others may even say something else entirely. BioFauna Exotics will tell you how WE feed our animals, why we feed this way, and allow you to be the judge for yourself based on the quality of our animals if this is the route you wish to take.

We like to feed our animals 1 frozen/thawed prey item that is slightly bigger than the thickest part of the snake’s body every 7-10 days. For babies, we may feed every 5-7 days until we are satisfied that they are eating readily and are ready for new homes. By feeding smaller meals on a weekly schedule we will know instantly if something is causing our animals to stop eating. For example, if an animal is only being fed every 2-3 weeks and stops eating for 2 meals, that animal has gone almost 6 weeks without food and medical attention. If an animal that is otherwise healthy (and not sexually mature) and that is fed weekly decides to miss two meals, that animal has only gone 2 weeks without food and we can immediately seek medical attention knowing that this particular behavior is NOT normal for that particular animal. Again, the key here is that we are feeding smaller meals more frequently as opposed to larger meals less frequently. There are also rumors about BCC having more sensitive stomachs and that they are prone to regurg. While we cannot vouch on the authenticity of these statements, we CAN say that by using our feeding method we have never had a regurge from any of our animals and when we did, it was as a result of other issues that needed medical attention. So again, because we feed weekly, we were able to catch it early and treat the issue. This is also a really good tactic to use to prevent prolapses as well, which is very common when people “power feed”, or feed items that are too large. What is power feeding, you ask?

Some people prefer to feed a “large” meal every 2-3 weeks for their adults (these individuals are feeding 2-3lb rabbits to 6ft+ adults). This is also acceptable, and is a tactic used for people who may need longer times between feedings, or for personal preference. What we **DO NOT CONDONE** is “power feeding”. There exist individuals who believe that by feeding multiple large prey items per feeding, and/or increasing the frequency of feedings, that their boas will be able to reach sexual maturity faster and therefore produce offspring sooner. Stories exist of 3 year old female boas
reaching 6ft+ in length. While it is possible to do this do your snakes, you are SIGNIFICANTLY cutting down on their life span and causing major health risks. This also leads to obesity in boas (yes, this is a real thing) which again, can lessen the length of time you have to enjoy your snake since many in this state succumb to fatty liver disease. We at BioFauna Exotics let our boas grow slowly and naturally, allowing our females time to develop the proper weight and muscle tone for successful pairings. This ensures that our females are truly ready to become moms, and we can enjoy them for as long as possible! As always, make sure that your boa has access to clean water at all times.

As mentioned above, NEVER feed more than one snake in the same enclosure at the same time! When animals are paired for breeding, they are separated a day or two before they are fed and reintroduced after they have had enough time to digest their meals. In the case of younger boas, there is no reason to house them together and it only causes significant health risks to both animals.

**A Note on Live vs. Frozen Thawed:**

There are many breeders and keepers who feed or have fed live prey to a snake in their lives- we are no exception! Sometimes, this practice is unavoidable, especially for very picky or non-feeders. HOWEVER, we at BioFauna Exotics believe it is our responsibility to ensure that our babies are eating readily on frozen/thawed prey to ensure the easiest, safest, and most humane way to feed your new snake. Live prey might be ok in order to get them started, but willful failure to transition boas from live to frozen is irresponsible and potentially life threatening. Live prey will, and justifiably so, fight back when they are attacked. This can result in serious injury to your snake! Further, leaving prey in with your snake unsupervised can result in the prey stressing out or even feeding on your snake. Many snakes have died as a result of this seemingly harmless act. Finally, while feeding a live mouse once a week may seem feasible, your boa will not be sustained on such a diet when they are 6, 7, or even 8 feet in length! You will be feeding live, large rats and rabbits to your snake. Save yourself the heartache and feed frozen/thawed, and insist that the boas you buy are established feeders!

Thank you for taking the time and making a concerted effort to becoming a responsible reptile keeper! BioFauna Exotics thanks you, your animals thank you, and your hobby thanks you!

If you have any other questions, please do not hesitate to contact us!

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