

BREEDING OF CAPTIVE PYTHON AT KOTA ZOO, RAJASTHAN

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Among snakes, the Indian python (*Python molurus*) appears to have bred for the first time at Jaipur Zoo as reported in 1965. Since then many zoos have bred this species (Acharjyo, 1998). The first attempt was made in 1974 at Nandankanan Biological Park, Orissa by Dr. L.N. Acharjyo to record the reproduction and growth rate of Indian Python in captivity. The study was further extended up to 1978 and duly reported by him (Acharjyo, 1980). Successful breeding of captive stock depends on the age, health, living conditions and adequacy of food supply.

The Government Zoo at Kota possessed a male python, which was caught in April 1996 from Ittawa Village. This animal was later shifted to Jodhpur Zoo in 1999. The present pair of a male and a female python was procured from Ganesh Travelling Zoo in November 1998. The pythons are housed in a 2.74 m x 3.10 m room with cemented floor. A thick layer of fine sand has been spread in one corner and a large water container is placed in the enclosure, in which the pythons find recluse during hot summer months. The female is 3.90m long, whereas the male is much sleeker and smaller at 2.50m. The information gathered from the owners of Ganesh Travelling Zoo suggested that these animals were with them for a long time (unspecified) and had not bred, as they were kept in separate cages.

The female started laying eggs around 1200 hours on 10 May 2000. The process continued until evening and it was seen coiled around the soggy mass of eggs on the morning of 11 May. The female did not accept any food during the incubation of eggs. The maximum and minimum atmospheric temperature ranged between 40.5^o C and 25.2^o C during the incubation period. The humidity was relatively high during 62 days of incubation due to frequent thunder storms and showers in May, June and July. The female uncoiled herself on 5 July by retiring into the water tank and left the eggs unattended. Eight baby pythons hatched between the night of 10 July and morning of 11 July. Some of them had to be helped out of their eggshell as the eggs were so tightly glued together. Out of a total clutch of 28 eggs, eight live baby pythons hatched. Among the dead embryos, five were fully developed embryos and four undeveloped. Eleven

Table 1. Early growth rates of Indian Python in captivity up to four months of age.

Dates	Number	Mean Length (Range) cm.	Mean Weight (Range) g.
11.vii.2000	8	57.00(52-61)	76.75 (42-96)
21.vii.2000	8	59.56 (52-63)	71.70 (36-90)
11.viii.2000	8	63.93 (53-65)	94.50 (52-110)
11.ix.2000	5	64.62 (53.5-68)	101.50 (62-120)
11.x.2000	4	65.00 (64-66)	109.00 (90-110)
11.xi.2000	4	66.75 (65.5-68)	115.00 (100-120)

unfertilized eggs were also found. The average number of ventral and caudal scales was 240 and 57 respectively and umbilical attachment was between scale number 170-172. These scales fused together within three days of hatching. The average length and weight of baby pythons was 57 cm and 76.75g (Ranges given in Table 1). The hatchlings were individually identified based on the markings on their back, which could be of three types, i.e. dumb bell, star and cross-shaped. In the first ten days, a fall in the body weight was noticed as the yolk sac absorbed within the body at the time of hatching was utilised by the animals. First shedding of skin was seen on 23 July. The baby pythons were fed on 10-20g of meat and fish pieces every 5-6 days. No infighting was observed among the young pythons but the lighter and smaller individuals started showing signs of weakness. They could not shed their skin easily, which became loose and hung on their bodies. Three young pythons died in the second month of their life, whereas one died in the third month. Since then, the remaining four individuals are doing well, looking healthy and shedding their skin every 20-25 days. The average growth rates are given in Table 1.

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