

# Enriching Your Snakes Life



Unfortunately, many snake keepers do not think about their snakes' psychological and physiological issues. It is well known within the hobby that a vast number of snake species are fairly 'lazy' creatures, perhaps only venturing out of their hide for food, water, or a mate. This is a fairly accurate summation for some species, and this habit will most certainly be the same in the wild as well as in captivity. However, in the wild the snake may spend hours or perhaps days hunting for food, may travel some distance to find water and may spend weeks courting females and perhaps fighting males in the process. This article describes the many ways possible to keep your pet snake healthy and active, ensuring little chance of obesity or behavioural problems caused by boredom or inactivity.

The first and foremost point is to ensure that the basics are in place. That is; an adequate sized terrarium, appropriate temperature levels allowing for thermal regulation, adequate humidity levels if necessary, enough food and water and a hiding place where the snake may retreat to. Once these are all in place, it is possible to expand on each area, making life more interesting for your snake and also a more pleasurable viewing experience for yourself.

## Terrarium Size

Many experts in the reptile industry will no doubt spend a considerable amount of time explaining to beginners and interested people that snakes do not need much space. It is widely accepted that snakes will live happily in a terrarium smaller than its own length, and I do not disagree completely with this statement. In fact, many individual snakes will suffer dramatic consequences when placed into a terrarium too large. They often become so stressed they will not feed, become very timid, rarely venture out of a hide, become overly aggressive and will not control their body temperature adequately leading to further problems.

Having said the above, not all snakes are prone to these problems. Most colubrids such as Corn snakes and Kingsnakes, as well as some larger Python and Boa species are often quite comfortable in large enclosures. Some fortunate keepers even dedicate whole rooms to their beloved pets, particularly snakes as large as Burmese or

Reticulated Pythons. To those keepers who successfully manage this, I praise you, and urge other keepers to follow suit if your budget and space allows you to.

It is important when changing the size of your terrarium that you are comfortable with your snakes feeding habits, and that it is comfortable with you as the handler. The larger the terrarium, the more hiding areas and décor there should be. This will allow more interest and the opportunity for more exercise. If however, your snake does not take well to the move and refuses food, do not move the snake back into its original enclosure straight away. Instead, try for around 4 weeks to let your snake settle in, ensuring the heat levels are appropriate and that there are enough hiding areas. I suggest for the initial move that the décor and hide areas from the old terrarium are moved into the larger one. This will make your snake feel more comfortable and speed up the transitional period.

## Terrarium Décor

The terrarium furnishings will play a very important role in enriching your snakes' life. After all, it is these furnishings that it will sit on, sleep on, feed on and crawl on every day. It is important that the right décor is chosen to stimulate your snakes senses and allow it a chance to explore on a regular basis.

The first level of décor is the substrate. Whilst most keepers offer a standard substrate with an even level across the terrarium, there are other ways. You could try offering various substrate depths, types and levels. For instance, you could build the substrate up to 20cm deep at one end of the enclosure, perhaps held up by some natural cork bark or rock, and then have a lower layer of 3cm deep towards the other end. Within this substrate you could place tunnels leading into hiding places, which is easily achieved by simply placing conventional toilet rolls or similar plastic piping. If you do this, try to ensure you can still have easy access to the snake so that you can check on it at will.

Offering more than one substrate within the terrarium will allow the snake to move around on different textured surfaces. Perhaps for a rainforest species; bark chips could be mixed with soil and dried leaves. A desert species could have various soils, sands and rocks mixed together to offer a natural desert scene.

Fake plants are perfect for snake enclosures; they can be washed easily and do not get squashed if a heavy snake decides to sit on it. These plants can hang from the ceiling or back wall, drape and wrap around sticks perched across the terrarium, or could simply be placed in bundles on the ground to mimic small bushes. However, there are a range of live plant species that can be used with your snake if you are looking for a more realistic habitat, which will also offer new smells and textures.



## Heating and Lighting

It is important to realise not only what temperatures your snake should be exposed to, but also in what manner they are offered. In the wild, heat is gained by use of the sun, but this is not to say that a snake must have a basking area with heat or light from above. You should first find out where your snake comes from and the daily habits which it would naturally go through.

For diurnal species, having basking sites within the terrarium are particularly important. These should be open areas underneath a heat source, preferably more than one area and could be directed on a flat stone, a hanging branch or even on top of a hiding area.

Nearly all diurnal snakes will bask in the sun; it is therefore only natural to offer a spot bulb type of heat. This will mimic the sun and should allow the snake to bask directly underneath the area which the bulb is pointing. In the wild the sun will move throughout the day, meaning that the snake may also need to move in order to keep up with the sun. Often, diurnal species do not bask during the middle of the day; instead they will bask in the early morning and late afternoon when the sun is at a bearable heat. By placing 2 spot bulbs in different areas of the terrarium wired into a timer, you can mimic the effect of the sun and give the snake the chance to search out a new, better basking site. If you have a large budget and terrarium to play with, you can offer further basking sites for different times of the day. You could even set up the lamps with timers on dimming thermostats so that the temperature output could increase or decrease depending on the time of day. This may be quite elaborate and unnecessary, but would be an interesting addition to particularly large enclosures and will certainly force your snake into it's natural basking habits.

Many nocturnal or rainforest dwelling species will not bask in the sun, but should be exposed to a higher day time temperature. Although it is recommended that you offer varying temperatures at different times, the ambient air temperature should always be maintained. This can be achieved by using a Ceramic heater. These can be purchased in varying wattages depending on the size of your terrarium and are attached to the ceiling of your terrarium. Many of these species will obtain their heat from the ground surface, usually on flat rocks which have been exposed to the sun during the day and allowed to heat up. This heat is retained for some hours throughout the evening. Hot rocks are available to mimic this behaviour, although it is only suggested that you use these for a few hours at the appropriate time; generally as lights go out until 4 hours later.



**Right Picture: WhitePython™ Ultra Slim Ceramic Heater**

Lighting should still be offered for these species to create a natural photoperiod. We recommend using the **WhitePython™ LED lights** which do not give off any heat and are cost efficient to run. At night, the **Red** or **Blue** options are ideal and allow you to view your snake roaming around when it's most active.

## Water

Water is generally offered in a small water dish which often doesn't even allow the snake to fully submerge itself. Although this is adequate for many desert dwelling species, other species will regularly travel to streams, ponds or puddles to drink, bathe and swim. Offering water in a larger dish, away from the heat source will stimulate the snake to bathe and swim more often, allowing for more exercise. Be sure to watch for faeces in the water, as many snakes will commonly excrete during bathing.

Allowing water movement through a pump, air bubbles or even a small waterfall will also stimulate the snake to bathe and drink regularly. For rainforest dwelling species, particularly arboreal species, a drip system and / or misting system will simulate rainfall in the wild. This may be very important for some species that will predominantly drink from water droplets that gather on leaves, branches or even their own coils.

## Feeding

One major part to all snakes' lives is feeding. In the wild, snakes will have to hunt for a wide variety of live prey. Some snakes may ambush their prey; others will use sight and chase their prey, while others will use scent. In captivity, feeding live prey is frowned upon unless in extreme circumstances where the snake simply refuses all other feeding methods. Feeding live prey to captive snakes would of course stimulate their natural feeding behaviour; however it can be dangerous and is almost certainly not necessary. It is possible though, to recreate some of the snakes' natural feeding responses and make it exercise for food.

Unfortunately, a large percentage of reptile hobbyists are not educated enough to realise the importance of reptile stimulation through feeding. Snakes get most of their exercise through hunting and breeding, so if your snake is not used for breeding and is fed by virtually placing a dead rodent into its mouth, it will hardly get much exercise. This has caused a large number of reptiles in captivity to become overweight and obese, usually with the owners unaware. There are a number of methods you can use to both stimulate the natural senses of hunting and to also force the snake to move around the enclosure in order to feed.

If your terrarium has plenty of décor and hide areas, try hiding the food underneath foliage or in hiding areas. By rubbing the food along different surfaces of the terrarium it is possible to create a scent trail. Try and make this trail as elaborate as possible, this will no doubt confuse the snake but will inevitably make it move more and get more exercise.

If your snake has a routine feeding regime, for instance every Monday evening, there is every chance it will begin to associate this time with food. This has been commonly recorded in large pythons and can evolve into a very dangerous situation. Not only is it unnatural but can result





in the snake striking at anything that enters the enclosure at this particular time, even your hand. Many keepers will see this as aggression, but may simply be a triggered feeding response. It is more natural to feed your snake at random intervals and at different times during the day or night (depending on whether your snake is diurnal or nocturnal).

Try to keep regular watch of your snake, if it is being lazy and is simply hides all day long, don't feed it. Wait until the snake starts to venture out and search for food without any food actually being there, this will encourage the snake to venture out for food more often, thereby gaining more exercise and encouraging it's natural psychological behaviours.

Many keepers may simply place the dead rodent into the snakes terrarium ready for the snake to come along and feed at leisure. This is not a bad thing, but "tease" feeding is an excellent method to re-create a wild animal's movements. With a pair of long forceps you can grip the food item and move it around, simulating the movements of the animal in the wild. If the snake shows interest, move it further away and around the enclosure, enticing the snake to chase and hunt the food. Once the snake strikes; shake the food quite violently to simulate a struggle situation. At this point, the snake should coil around the food and exert a great deal of energy in asphyxiating the prey. This method is the closest you can come to seeing the snakes' natural feeding response, whilst also making it utilise it's body muscles to it's fullest.

Finally, try to offer a variety of food items. This can be difficult in captivity with limited choice, but many retailers will offer mice, rats and chicks of varying sizes. If you search further afield, it will be possible to acquire frozen hamsters, gerbils, quail, rabbit and all sorts of other food items. Mix it up and don't be afraid to try new things.

## Handling

Handling your snake on a regular basis can be considered on par with taking your dog for a walk. It is a way of taking the snake out of its normal environment to provide exercise and an array of unusual smells. Many wild caught snakes, or snakes not used to being handled should have limitations on the amount of time spent handling as it may cause stress. However, captive bred individuals that are regularly handled will often enjoy human interaction and the chance to move around different surfaces. On a warm day, don't be afraid to take your snake outside in the garden and let it roam around on the grass. Be very careful not to take your eyes off the snake though, the last thing you want is for it to quickly burrow into the ground or worse still, grabbed by a passing predatory bird. Being able to handle your snake will not only allow exercise and scent stimulation, it will also allow for easier maintenance and veterinary care if needed.

## Summary

It has hardly been recognised that snakes require mental stimulation to stay fit and healthy in captivity. Perhaps as snakes do not show visible signs of expression or emotion it is almost impossible for a keeper to spot if their snake is healthy or happy. However, I hope this article, together with your own ideas will allow your snake to live a longer, happier life and prevent it from becoming obese and having any behavioural issues.

By Chris Jones  
Founder of WhitePython™