

The Maintenance and Reproduction of the DWARF PYTHON OF ANGOLA AND NAMIBIA

by
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There are few things more exciting to herpetoculturists than receiving some new taxon of reptile or amphibian, especially some particularly coveted animal, one of the "dream species" that we each hold in our fantasies. Raising these animals to maturity and then to successful reproduction is one of the most rewarding experiences that any with our interests can accomplish. And regardless of the species, the success of any such project speaks an eloquent testament to the dedication, patience, and sometimes the luck of the person who is able to raise and propagate the animals in his or her care.

Our own "dream species" have all seemed unattainable to us, fantasy crea-

tures impossible to acquire, some impossible even to experience. While not all of the creatures of our daydreams are boas or pythons, certainly it is that group that in recent years has been foremost in our thoughts. The pythons and boas of our fantasies are a rare bunch.

Some day we hope just to see one of the preserved specimens of *Corallus cropanii*, the terrestrial relative of the emerald tree boa from coastal São Paulo state in southeastern Brazil, a boa so rare that it has no common name. Only three specimens are known since its description, and it is said by some to have gone extinct in the 40 years or so since its discovery. A living captive specimen, or even better (since we're fantasizing,) several captive young sexed pairs of this species makes a superior boa fantasy.

Some day we hope to see a living specimen of the rough-scaled python, *Morelia carinata*, an Australian python known to science since 1981; only four specimens are reported. We once traveled to Western Australia to see the only two preserved specimens, deposited in the Western Australia Museum in Perth. What a fantastic python it is, too! It is likely the python species with the smallest distribution in nature, apparently restricted to perhaps as few as a half dozen separated patches of monsoon forest in the bottoms of canyons, and tiny islands of forest surrounded by harsh dry rocky country, each patch smaller than 10 acres. This is a species that desperately needs the establishment of a well-managed captive population, but that's a fantasy that will have to happen in Australia.



The eggs of dwarf pythons are huge. Normally the female coils about the eggs, completely covering them. Here the female has been disturbed to reveal the eggs.

Of course we hold dear the usual boid dreams—the albino blood python, the axanthic Burmese python, an albino jungle carpet python, an albino Madagascar ground boa, a piebald boa constrictor—the list of beautiful possibilities is endless in fantasies. But one of our oldest dreams came true for us when, in 1990, we received in trade from a U.S. zoo hatchling dwarf pythons, *Python anchietae*; two males and a female.

The dwarf python, also known as the Angolan python, has been known to science for more than a century. This unusual small python was formally described in 1887 by J. V. Barbosa du Bocage, Director of the Zoological Section of the National Museum of Lisbon for most of the last half of the nineteenth century. At that time animal specimens from Portuguese colonies were pouring into the Museum, as Bocage built the famous collections in his charge. Though actually better known as an ornithologist than as a herpetologist, from 1863 to 1904 Bocage published 58 technical herpetological papers and described 111 new species of amphibians and reptiles. Most of these new species described by Bocage were from Africa, and many of the taxa he described are still recognized today (Adler, 1989).

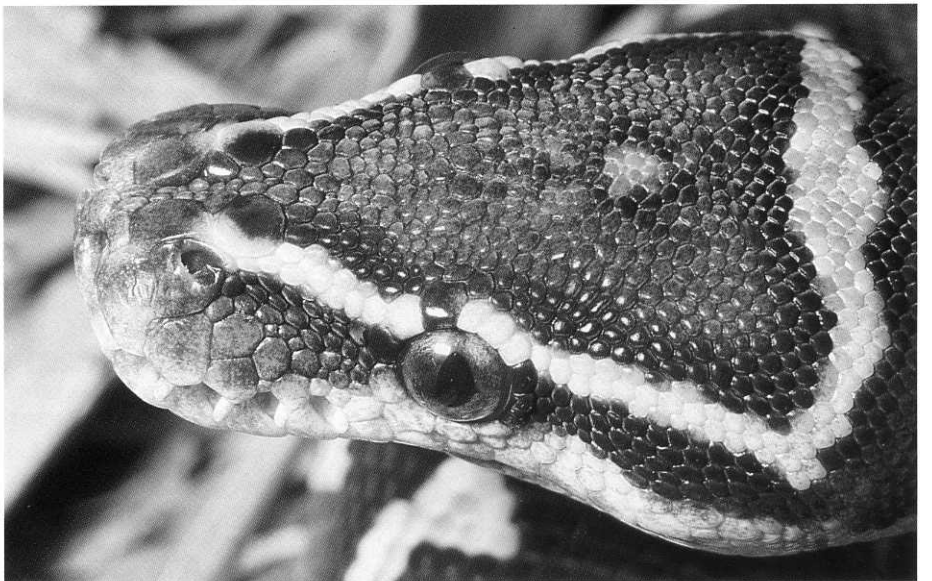
The type specimen of dwarf python was named in honor of a relatively unknown Portuguese naturalist, a J. de Anchieta who died in 1897 (Gotch, 1986). It is presumed that this person was a woman, as Bocage chose the feminine possessive suffix "ae" to make *anchietae*, rather than the masculine form *anchietai* or *anchietaiana*. J. de Anchieta was resident in Angola for a length of time, though the length of her stay is unknown to us.

This species has two fairly unusual conditions of scalation for a python. First, it has a large number of very small scales on the top of the head. A pair of internasal scales and a pair of anterior prefrontal scales are typically the only plate-like scales on the top of the head. Second, most of the dorsal scales on the head and body are rounded, slightly domed and not overlapping, or only slightly overlapping. Dwarf pythons have a smooth beaded feel to a hand stroking the body. The body shape in cross-section is flattened and the back is broad, as is seen in many species of rock-dwelling reptiles.

The type specimen came from the vicinity of the town of Catumbela in the Benguela province of Angola (see Fig. 1). The town of Catumbela is located on the coast at the mouth of the Catumbela River. It seems unlikely that dwarf py-



Like most pythons at hatching, hatching dwarf pythons make several slits in their egg shells before emerging. Using small scissors, we often cut connections between the slits to make certain that the hatchling does not drown in the egg.



A diagnostic characteristic of scalation of *Python anchietae* is the numerous tiny scales on the dorsal surface of the head, as can be seen on this subadult specimen.



Captive-bred and -raised dwarf pythons are typically very docile and gentle. It seems unlikely that many wild dwarf pythons will ever be brought into captivity. If so, the future of this species in captivity will depend on the breeding successes of the animals presently in captivity.

thons are found in the immediate vicinity of the town; possibly the type specimen came from a locality upstream along the Catumbela River.

So far as we know, the type locality is the northernmost recorded locality for *P. anchietae*. However, we consider it highly probable that populations of dwarf pythons are found in the rugged Angolan Highlands; suitable habitat and elevations continue north of the type locality into the district of Cuanza Sul and east through the district of Huambo and into the district of Bié. The species occurs south into Namibia to the vicinity of Windhoek, the capital. Dwarf pythons have been found south of Windhoek in the Khomas Highlands and the Hakos Mountains. Again, suitable habitat occurs further south of these localities, and the species may range south into the high rugged country north and east of the drainages of the Fish and Orange Rivers, nearly to the southern border of Namibia. We are told of specimens being found in this area, but we are not aware of museum specimens or published accounts of dwarf pythons from this far

Most areas where *P. anchietae* occur receive an average annual precipitation of only 4–8 in (10–20 cm). There are exaggerated seasonal changes; summers are very hot (daytime high temperatures exceeding 123°F (55°C!)) have been recorded, and winters can be very cold (below freezing many nights). In such inhospitable country it is a certainty that dwarf pythons are not evenly distributed throughout their range, but occur in scattered populations.

This python is very seldom encountered. There are a variety of reasons it is rarely seen. The area of their distribution is nearly unpopulated, and travel there is difficult and expensive. Most of the known specimens have come from the vicinity of Windhoek, but that is more likely a consequence of Windhoek being the most densely human-populated area within the range, rather than because of any particularly dense python-populations (which is not to say that the Windhoek area is densely populated by world standards). Dwarf pythons are probably crepuscular or nocturnal most of the time

(though in captivity they can be quite active in the day), and they are likely inactive during the cold months, the driest times, and the hottest months of the year (in other words, most of the year).

The Angolan half of the range of the dwarf python has been the epicenter of the yet-ongoing Angolan civil war for nearly 20 years. The rebels control the southern portion of Angola, and rebel headquarters are within 60 miles of the type locality of the species; over a million land mines and other explo-

sive anti-personnel devices are believed to be scattered throughout the area. This has effectively excluded snake collectors from the Angolan portion of the range. In the southern extent of the range, Namibia has very strict regulations controlling the collection of snakes. Dwarf pythons receive special legal protection, they have nearly become the national reptile of Namibia, and legal exportation is essentially impossible. This has kept collectors out of Namibia.

For most of the history of this species, nothing other than its existence was known.

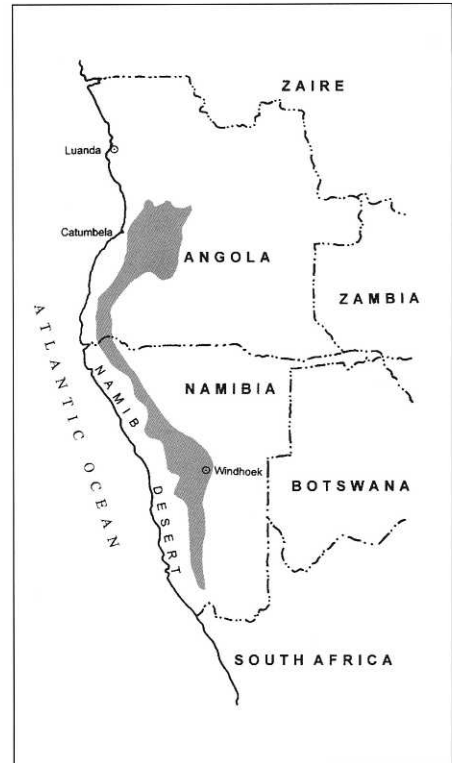


Fig. 1. The shaded area indicates the probable range of the dwarf python, *Python anchietae*, based on suitable habitat and elevations.

However, there has been a growing number of specimens available for study during the past 30 years. FitzSimons (1962) reported there to be 6 known specimens of *P. anchietae*. Finkeldey (1963) examined 7 specimens, including 3 living specimens, making a total of 9 or 10 known specimens. In 1980 we have record of only 9 dwarf pythons in captivity (3 at the Houston Zoo, Houston, Texas, 1 privately owned in a U.S. collection, and 5 at the Transvaal Snake Park, South Africa). Today we are aware of fewer than 20 wild-caught specimens alive in captivity throughout the world, including several of the specimens captive in 1980 that are still alive. Three U.S. zoos have reproduced *P. anchietae* since the first captive breeding



As is typical for most python species, dwarf pythons remain in the egg 12–36 hours after slitting. During this time the remaining amounts of yolk are absorbed into the body.

south. There are so few records of dwarf pythons that it is impossible to clearly delimit the distribution of this species at this time.

The north–south distribution of dwarf pythons extends at least 600 miles (960 km) and perhaps as much as 1100 miles (1760 km). Along the coast in this region of southwest Africa are harsh deserts (including the Namib Desert); moving inland one gains elevation quickly, and 40–100 miles (60–160 km) from the coast the elevation is typically 3250 ft (1000 m) or more. Dwarf pythons occur in a narrow belt along this incline at elevations of 2450–6000 ft (about 750–1850 m) in rocky areas. At the eastern boundary of the distribution the landscape becomes a featureless flat plain.



At three months of age, the dark colors of this dwarf python have begun to pale. The dark pattern of hatchlings is uniform chocolate brown.

