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African Rock Pythons, Northern and Southern *[Python sebae]* and *[Python natalensis]*

African Giants with an Undeserved Reputation

African rock pythons are large, fairly heavy bodied species of pythons that appear very similar to the Burmese python (*Python bivittatus*). Ground color varies from dark brown, olive, to olive brown with irregular yellowish, yellow brown, to chestnut yellow stripes, blotches, or streaks. Has a distinct “arrowhead” shaped marking on the head. Two species are known, the Northern African Python (*Python sebae*) and Southern African Python (*Python natalensis*). As with other large python (and large constrictor species specifically), African rock pythons are mainly sedentary ambush predators. African rock pythons and other large constrictor species are a controlled, regulated, or prohibited species in some states. In captivity, these large constrictor species have had a negative reputation for being aggressive and dangerous, but this is more likely a result of a lack of widespread captive breeding of this species. Many captive born African rock pythons can be just as docile as, if not more so, than other large constrictor species. Always check any applicable federal, state, and local laws and ordinances that may pertain to the specific possession of this species.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: Python

Species: *Python sebae** and *Python natalensis**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, African rock pythons can attain longevity of 25 to 30 years, although up to 40 years is also not uncommon.

Distribution and Habitat

African rock pythons are species of large, terrestrial to semi-aquatic and semi-arboreal Old World pythons indigenous to a wide range of sub-Saharan Africa. Recently elevated to full species status, the two species of African rock pythons inhabit slightly differing ranges in Africa. The nominate species, the African, or North African rock python inhabits western to central Africa, from Mauritius, through Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, southwestern Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, and Benin, to Nigeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Congo and Democratic Republic of the Congo. The other species, the Southern African rock python inhabits the remainder of southern Africa, from Angola and Namibia, through South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. Some areas of overlap occur in east-central Africa, where the ranges of the two species overlap. Within this range, African rock pythons may occupy a wide variety of primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal environments, and can be common and widespread species of pythons over much of their range. African rock pythons can occur from tropical and sub-tropical rainforests and other tropical forests and woodlands, to dryer, open forests and woodlands, savannahs, grasslands, to rocky, semi-arid deserts and scrublands, agricultural and cultivated areas, and suburban areas near human habitation. These pythons especially favor these above habitats when they are near wetlands or other permanent water sources, such as marshes, swamplands, seasonally flooded wetlands, lakes, rivers, streams, and other reservoirs.

Origin/History

Python sebae (Gmelin, 1789); *Python natalensis* Smith, 1833.

Information and timelines on when the (now) two African Rock Python species, the African Rock Python (*Python sebae*) and Southern African Python (*Python natalensis*) are sparse. However, they probably were first imported during the 1960's or 1970's from Togo, Benin, and Ghana, where the majority of Africa's other wildlife exports took place.

These large constrictors, thus far, have never reached nearly the levels of popularity as the Burmese and Reticulated pythons in the pet trade, owing to their relatively drabber coloration, huge sizes, and bad reputations when it came to their temperaments and dispositions. In 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would list the two species of African rock pythons, along with ultimately 7 other boa and python species as injurious species under the Lacey Act, thereby prohibiting their importation into the U.S.

This was due to the widely publicized issue of invasive Burmese pythons in Florida, and in 2001, or the early 2000's, breeding populations of African rock pythons were also detected in south Florida, which generated widespread media hysteria that the two species would hybridize in Florida, creating a "man-eating super snake" species. Such a phenomenon never actually took place, although the two species could be hybridized in captivity.

Experience Level Required

Advanced.

Size

African rock pythons range from 18 to 24 inches as hatchlings. As adults, they can range in size from 12 to 22 feet on average for adults, or 144 to 264 inches depending on their sex, age, and overall husbandry and growth rates. Males are dimorphic, and are usually slightly smaller than females. Some dwarf localities are also known to remain at smaller sizes. **Always be sure to consider the potential adult size and long term commitment of keeping and housing an African rock python or any other large snake prior to obtaining one as part of being a responsible reptile or other pet owner!**

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial. Housing must be sealed, well ventilated, and escape proof. Hatchling African rock pythons can be started out in a 20 gallon long terrarium or similar sized enclosure, but will soon require larger accommodations. If glass enclosures are used at any point, be sure that the enclosure retains sufficient humidity. Many of the commercially made plastic or fiberglass enclosures, or otherwise custom-designed enclosures that can retain heat and humidity well are perhaps the best and most practical enclosures to use to house mid to large sized boas and pythons. Depending on the age and size of the animal, a six to eight foot by three foot enclosure or larger is required. African rock pythons can be maintained on a substrate of cage liner material, cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, or sphagnum fir mixtures, but always ensure that the substrate does not become too damp or moist. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. African rock pythons will also require a large sturdy water dish or tub that must be cleaned, sanitized, and changed regularly, especially if dirtied. Providing an adequately sized hidebox, artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, logs, and other cage furnishings can also provide additional hiding and basking opportunities. African rock pythons are primarily terrestrial, and floor space is more important than height.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized UTH (or tank heating pad), ceramic or radiant heat emitter, or incandescent, UVA/UVB, or other heat producing bulb. Ideal temperatures for African rock pythons range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 86 to 92 degrees F on the warm side. Most species of snakes have fairly simple and undemanding heating and lighting requirements in captivity, and do not require additional UVA/UVB lighting, although providing it can be greatly beneficial for their health, immune system, and overall wellness. Also be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least once per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well. African rock pythons should be maintained at relatively moderate relative humidity levels, which may range from about 50 to 60%, and with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, African rock pythons are carnivorous, and will prey upon a wide range of small to large mammals, birds, and other reptiles that they can ambush and consume. In captivity, African rock pythons can be given feeder rodents or rabbits of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. Larger feeder or prey items for exceptionally large pythons can include prey items such as large rabbits, and even poultry, pigs, and other pre-killed livestock, which can also often be obtained through alternative means through local wholesalers, meat, or agricultural suppliers in one's area. In most general circumstances, it is recommended to provide humanely pre-killed prey animals acquired from a reputable source, as offering live animals to any snake can carry risk of serious injury or even death to your snake when the prey item bites to defend itself or otherwise gnaws on your animal. A general rule of thumb when selecting feeder prey item sizes for your snake is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the snake's

widest point. It should also be noted that many snakes may refuse food for longer periods of time over several weeks or months, especially in the fall and winter months or if several other husbandry conditions are not being met. While these things can be alarming, it is oftentimes normal, but their overall health and weight should be monitored during these times to make sure they do not lose weight or otherwise deteriorate. Most snakes typically are fed whole prey items, and do not usually require additional calcium or vitamin D3 supplementation unless otherwise directed. Their feeding frequency will also depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed them, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile Afrocks are often initially more nervous and defensive. They may gape and hiss, and attempt to bite what they perceive to be a threat or a predator. Handle them gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. African rock pythons hold a bad reputation for their aggressiveness, which amounts to their lesser popularity than the Burmese and Reticulated pythons in the hobby and industry. Some Afrocks can be calmed and handled to the point of being docile, but **this is not a beginner's species of snake**. Large constrictors are still very strong animals that should be handled carefully. Do not place or allow a larger snake around the neck when handling an African rock python and **please follow safe and common sense handling practices when keeping or working with large snakes**.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

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