

FEEDING OF LIVE PREY

FEEDING LIVE ANIMALS TO CAPTIVE ANIMALS, INCLUDING SNAKES, VIOLATES THE ANIMALS PROTECTION ACT NO. 71 OF 1962. IT IS A CRIMINAL OFFENCE.

2. Offences in respect of animals. – (1) Any person who-

- a) Overloads, overdrives, overrides, ill-treats, neglects, infuriates, tortures or maims or cruelly beats, kicks goads or terrifies any animal; or
- g) Save for the purpose of training hounds maintained by a duly established and registered vermin club in the destruction of vermin, liberates any animal in such manner or place as to expose it to immediate attack or danger of attack by other animals or wild animals, or baits or provokes any animal or incites any animal to attack another animal; or
- h) Liberates any bird in such manner as to expose it to immediate attack or danger of attack by animals, wild animals or wild birds; or



A common myth associated with the keeping and caring for reptiles in captivity is that a reptile can only be given live feed such as mice or rodents as opposed to humanely killed prey 'rations'.

Arguments presented for the feeding of live prey are listed below and the relevant answers provided to assist animal welfare officers with the necessary facts and appropriate responses.

"My snake will die of hunger if I don't give it live food"

Feeding pre-killed prey items will most definitely NOT result in the animal dying of hunger. It is a simple fact – if an animal is hungry, it will eat. If they are not hungry they will refuse food offered. Reptiles are cold blooded animals and therefore their metabolic rate differs vastly from those of mammals. This is one reason why reptiles do not feed as frequently as mammals. In offering pre-killed prey items, one must also take into consideration that the reptile itself has to be housed in an environment (warm environment – using basking lamps, heating pads etc.) to stimulate a feeding response. A "cold" reptile will most definitely not feed.

"If I don't feed live animals, my venomous snake will not be able to digest its food"

Feeding pre-killed prey items will definitely NOT interfere with the digestion of said prey item. Although it is a natural behaviour for a venomous snake to envenomate its prey, this can still be achieved by feeding pre-killed prey items, since the venom released into the deceased prey item will assist the snake in digesting the prey item. The warmer the temperatures the easier it will be for the snake to digest successfully.

"Feeding live prey is more natural for the animal" or "I like to give my animal a chance to hunt and kill."

The fact is that these captive animals are no longer in a natural environment where most of their time is taken up searching for food or hiding from predators, especially during shedding periods.

Instead they are housed in small rectangular boxes. As for needing the “thrill of the kill” – this is anthropomorphism at its best. A reptile needs a large enough environment to give it sufficient mental and physical stimulation. Chasing a rodent around a small rectangular fish tank is not going to meet these basic needs.

“My snake will simply not accept dead food”

A reptile not used to feeding on pre-killed prey items can easily be converted to feeding on such items. It is important to make sure that the animal in question is actually hungry enough to take the offered prey item. In order to further achieve feeding pre-killed items, it is important to mimic “natural behaviour” – this can be done by warming up the prey item to room temperature and then “dangling” the prey item in front of the snake. In some instances “dragging” the prey item across the enclosure floor to mimic movement of a mouse running works better. This addresses the natural behaviour of the snake to strike towards movement as they hunt their prey items down in the wild via movement. Some snakes like fast-moving prey, some static prey and some like short sharp, jerky movements. Furthermore, it will also mimic the natural prey item, as the prey item offered will be warmed up to room temperature (reptiles not only go on movement but also by means of heat). The snake might have an acute sensitivity to half cooked smelling prey if the item is warmed in the microwave. If defrosted in warm water the prey needs to be dried off to give the snake the full impression of real live animal.

Training a reptile to accept dead food usually takes time and depends on each specific animal and its disposition. Some reptiles are easier to deal with than others – it really depends on the individual animal. However, dedicated and educated herpetologists would have no problem with spending the time on training the animals to eat dead food and achieving success.

Other points to remember

Feeding pre-killed ‘rations’ is also safer for the predator. It is commonly known that prey such as mice have killed or seriously injured disinterested captive snakes. In general, live prey when under stress will instinctively fight back and in many cases the predator has been severely injured. Many will argue that this is a common occurrence in the wild. Whether this is true or not is immaterial. We are responsible for the health and wellbeing of the animals in captivity.

In the wild, snakes, like most other carnivores, will usually take any opportunity to get a free and easy meal and will not pass up a dead animal if they happen to come across one. Snakes have been known to eat a fair amount of carrion which has been dead for some time. The stomach contents of wild snakes often contain prey that must have been in an advanced state of decomposition when it was eaten (The Snake: Howell Book House, 1997).

FEEDING OF ‘RATIONS’ OR HUMANELY KILLED PREY

NSPCA Statement of Policy: We are opposed to the euthanasia of fit and healthy animals but accept the reality that humane destruction is necessary. Euthanasia must be carried out by qualified personnel using approved and humane methods and with the greatest compassion.

Many members of the general public (reptile pet owners) lack the skill and knowledge to carry out humane methods of destruction, and animal welfare may well be disregarded. The euthanasia of animals including mice, rats, guinea pigs and rabbits destined to be fed to other animals should be carried out ethically and in accordance with recognized welfare standards.

ADDITIONAL WELFARE CONCERNS

Additional welfare concerns revolving around this topic are the general welfare of the ‘prey species’, i.e. breeding and housing. In many cases the reptile keepers breed ‘prey species’ such as mice in battery type systems before they are used as feed. It is important that the welfare of these animals is not compromised and that they are held in environments where their physical and psychological needs are appropriately catered for.