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Handling Chelonians and Snakes

Our topics for this week are:

- Catching and Handling Turtles and Tortoises
- Approaching, Catching, and Handling Snakes
- Special Equipment for Handling Snakes

TURTLES AND TORTOISES (CHELONIANS)

Approaching and Catching

Small chelonians can be captured by grasping the sides (bridge) of their shell from above with the handler's thumb between the front and hind legs on one side and the first three fingers on the other side between the other side's front and hind legs. Putting a wrap of self-adhering elastic bandage material around the shell can provide a better gripping surface, if needed. Large chelonians can be captured with two hands by the handler placing his thumbs on each side of the carapace (the upper shell) and other fingers under the plastron (the lower shell). Towels should be used to handle aquatic species for protection against their long claws.

Common snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpetina*), alligator snapping turtles (*Macroclemys temmincki*) and soft-shelled turtles can extend their head a long distance (2/3 the length of their shell) to inflict a bite. These can be grasped by their tail for initial control. To lift the turtle, its tail is firmly held and its body supported by grasping the edge of the carapace (upper shell) behind the neck or a hand placed under the back part of the plastron. Small biting turtles can be grasped and lifted by holding the back portion of the shell along with both hind legs.

Soft-shelled turtles will scratch and are difficult to hold without injuring them. Handlers should wear light gloves to protect themselves from scratches.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

If a turtle needs to be turned over for examination, inversion must be done slowly to reduce risk of intestinal torsion. Other than for brief examinations, handlers should not hold a turtle or tortoise upside down or with the chelonian's head lower than its heart. Either of these positions makes it difficult for the chelonian to breathe properly.

If examination of the chelonian's head is needed, the handler should gently pull on a foreleg or gently prod near the rectum to cause the head to come out and then quickly grasped with the handler's fingers behind the jaws. The head may also be able to be lured out by offering fresh fruit, especially berries.

Some tortoises and some turtles can retract their head and feet so effectively in their shells that chemical restraint is needed to handle these body parts for examination or treatment.

SNAKES

If pet snakes have been raised in captivity and handled gently while young, they are usually easily handled with little restraint. Garter snakes, kingsnakes, hog-nosed snakes, and gopher snakes

caught in the wild are sometimes kept as pets, but these are more intolerant of handling, susceptible to stress, and may have diseases and parasites they acquired in the wild.

Snakes kept as pet should not exceed 6½ feet in length. Constrictors more than 8 feet in length are so strong that they are considered inherently dangerous. Many escape or are released when they become a burden or bore to their owner resulting in endangerment to the snake's health and survival, indigenous wildlife, or unsuspecting humans.

Approaching and Catching

A handler should make sure the snake is aware of his presence and move at slightly slower than normal speed. Snakes bite in self defense or a feeding frenzy. Handlers need to make efforts not to threatened snakes nor to interfere with their feeding.

A tame snake is picked up by placing a hand toward the snake's side with outstretched fingers and slid under the first 1/3 of the snake's body. As it is picked up, the remainder of the body should be supported with the handler's other hand. The handler's fingers should be spread to provide wider support. The snake's head should not be reached for first nor the body held so tight that it cannot keep moving.

Young snakes, shedding snakes, and snakes expecting food tend to be more likely to bite. Arboreal snakes will try to progress up the handler's arm which, if permitted, can allow proximity to the handler's face and neck. This should not be allowed.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Snakes are typically supported with their movement directed, not held in a manner to inhibit their movement. Holding them tightly stimulates the snake to attempt escape from a predator. This can also seriously damage their muscles and cause death days later. They should be given the illusion that they are free to escape when they want. As they are loosely held, a "rolling hands" technique of holding them gives them the illusion that they are not trapped. They are allowed to move from one hand to the next then the hand they left becomes the next hand they move to. Immobilizing types of restraint should not typically be used. When holding a snake, it should never be held near the handler's face.

The most likely time for a handler to be bitten is when reaching into the snake's enclosure. The handler may startle them or because of the movement of his hand being perceived as food or containing food, especially if the handler has snake food odor on his hands. When reaching into an enclosure for an unfamiliar snake, the handler should block the snake's head with one hand held flat with fingers together. The purpose is to create a barrier over the snake's head while reaching for the body with the other hand. A flat hand is more difficult to bite. Handling should not be attempted if food smell is on the handler's hands or if the snake has recently eaten. Handling a snake soon after it has eaten, may cause the snake to regurgitate. This is common in ball pythons.

If a snake is possibly dangerous, a snake hook first should be used to lift the snake and then grasp their body. For those that are known to be dangerous, the head should be immobilized before picking the snake up. The basic hold for snake head restraint is to grasp the base of the skull between the thumb and middle finger with the index finger on top of the head. A snake pinning hook to pin the neck down on a soft surface may be needed to limit movement until the snake's head can be grasped for manual control. The snake's body should be restrained and supported after capturing the head to prevent thrashing and breaking its back. The snake's head

should be held firmly just behind the head without squeezed. Approximately one handler is needed per 5 ft to control boids.

Snakes have musk glands near their cloaca that they may use to excrete a malodorous secretion which also is distasteful to their predators.

Special Equipment for Handling Snakes

Lifting Hook

Snake hooks can be used to move snakes a short distance such as into a transport bag. The hook is worked under the snake between the first one-third to one-half of the snake's length to pick it up. The snake will remain still, trying to keep its balance. Snake hook poles should always be tilted down, away from the handler. Otherwise, the snake may slide toward the handler. Hooks can also help in guiding the movement of snakes on the ground or a floor.

Pinning Hook

A pinning hook is a Y-shaped stick with tubing for padding can be used to introduce a handler's presence and if necessary, pin a snake's head. Pinning sticks should be used when the snake is on a padded surface to reduce risk of injury to the snake. A strap of elastic extends from one of the ends of the Y to the other. The head can be immobilized by pressing the elastic band just behind the head, pushing the head down and trapping it until the head can be grasped by a free hand. Two pinning sticks may be necessary for difficult snakes. The base of the head is then grasped between the thumb and middle finger with the index finger on the top of the head and the stick removed.

Shields and Squeeze Box

Plexiglass or wire mesh shields with handles can be used to pin snakes until the head can be restrained. Properly fitted ventilated plexiglass or wire mesh lids on a box can be used to contain movement of the snake while the shield descends into the box to squeeze them for administration of injectable medication or chemical restraint. The bottom of the squeeze box should be padded.

Capture Poles

A capture pole can be made with a 3 foot long wooden pole, eye screw, and a long cord. One end of the cord is tied to, or otherwise fixed to, the end of the pole. The other end of the cord is run through an eye screw placed an inch from the end of the pole where the end of the cord is fixated. A capture loop is then created between the fixed end and the eye screw. The loop is dropped around the snake's neck and the loop closed on the neck by pulling on the cord. The risk of injuring the snake with a capture pole is greater than with a hook, but if gentle pressure is applied with the loop and restraint duration is short, a capture pole can be safe and effective.

Capture Tongs

Capture tongs are long handled metal grasping instruments. It is difficult to gauge the pressure being exerted with tongs so the risk of injury to a snake can be significant. Tongs can make a snake thrash and bite itself. Capture tongs should not be the sole means of restraint of a snake, but tongs can be useful to assist with handling with a hook.

Tongs should be used in presenting food to large snakes and in moving environmental

enrichment objects in a snake enclosure.

Transparent, Flexible Tubes

Bad-tempered snakes, such as small reticulated pythons, with a history of inappropriate biting should be handled in the same manner as poisonous snakes. Aggressive snakes can be moved to a large plastic bucket with its transport bag or using a snake hook. As the snake investigates a possible escape route upward and out of the bucket, a flexible, preferably darkened, tube can be placed over the snake's head and down part of the front of its body. A snake hook can help guide the head, if needed. Use of a cone to guide the snake into the tube is another method.

The tube should be just large enough to accommodate the thickest part of the snake's body so that it cannot turn around in the tube and long enough to keep the handler's hand on the tube, out of danger. Tubes work best for pit vipers due to their broad triangular head. When the snake has entered 1/3 of the tube's distance, the snake and tube are grasped to entrap the snake. If the first tube seems too large in diameter, a smaller tube can be slid down the open end to the snake for it to enter. The snake and small tube can be grasped and then the larger tube removed. Releasing the snake back into the bucket, transport bag, or enclosure is done by allowing it to move forward through the tube and out the other end.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Turtles should be held level and moved slowly
- Snakes should not be held firmly, except just behind the head if necessary
- There should be 1 handler for every 5ft of length in a constrictor snake being restrained
- Handlers hands should not have the odor of food whenever snakes are going to be held

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.