

Red Sand Boa *Eryx johnii johnii* (Russel, 1801) breeds at VOC Park Mini Zoo, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

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Red Sand boa belongs to the order Reptilia, family Boidae and sub-family Erycinae. The subfamily again is divided into three genera, viz., *Charina* (Rosy Boa or Rubber Boa), *Eryx* (Old World sand boa) and *Gongylophis* (Sand boa). *Charina* is found only in America and Africa and it is represented by four species. *Eryx* is represented by eight species and two of them *Eryx Johnii* and *Eryx whitakeri* are found in India. *Gongylophis* is represented by three species. *Gongylophis conicus* is found in India.

According to BCCP-CAMP (1998), a workshop to assess species, *Eryx johnii* consists of two subspecies, *Eryx johnii jhonii* and *Eryx johnii persicus*. *E. johnii johnii* is globally found in India and in Pakistan. In India it is found in northern, southern and western states. *E. johnii persicus* has a global distribution of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and in India, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

The other common names of *Eryx johnii johnii* are Eastern Red sand boa and Brown Sand Boa. Some people call it double-headed snake, as the tail is blunt, rounded and appears truncated which looks like a head. It is a non-venomous snake. Eyes are very small with vertical pupil. The adults reach the length of up to 120cms. Red Sand Boa is a nocturnal species and spends most of its time in underground; it needs dry and sandy soil for burrowing and is mostly active at night.

Their habitats are in and around croplands and grasslands, scrub forest, moist and dry deciduous forests. They are very slow movers, timid and shy. Due to shy and burrowing behaviour they make a coil with its head inside and search loose soil to make temporary burrow. They are ovoviviparous animals, i.e., the embryo develops inside the eggs that are retained within mother's body until they hatch young ones. They feed on rodents, other snakes and lizards.



Red sand boa juveniles



Red sand boa mother

This species is in illegal trade because of superstitious belief that if kept as a pet it will bring good luck and cure diseases like AIDS. It is protected under Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

Conservation status of this species is not assessed by the IUCN Red List of Threatened species but an academic workshop, the Biodiversity Conservation Priority Project (BCCP) Conservation

Assessment and Management Plan (CAMP) (1998) assessed the species as LR/lc/N (LOWER RISK-LEAST CONCERN/Nationally) and DATA DEFICIENT (Globally).

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Red sand boa juveniles with red colour with black stripes



When threatened hide its head and hold up its tail

Breeding at VOC Park Mini Zoo

At the reptile house, the zoo houses 8 Red Sand Boas in 10'X10' sized enclosure with 2' substrate filled with river sand and drinking water is provided. Since they are nocturnal and fossorial, most of the time in the day they do not come out but stay half a foot inside the sand. But they are active at night. The snakes are provided with one live young chicken once in a week. As per the records these snakes origin is in and around Coimbatore district either rescued or confiscated.

One of the female started giving birth in the month of January 2014 gave birth to six babies. They were red in colour with black

stripes. But the mother is brown in colour, when attains maturity the black stripes fade away and red colour became brown. At the time of birth, the snakes were weighed and measured which was 650gms and length about 86cms. The young ones weighed about 15gms and length 25cms. They were fed with locally available insects.

When looked at the literatures for any of the zoos in India bred this species in captivity, we could not find one. This maybe the first report carrying the information about the Red Sand Boa's breeding at one of the Indian zoos.

But a newspaper report in October 2010 says that a rescued sand boa

from smugglers, species unknown, bred at captivity in Punjab's Chandigarh zoo had 36 juveniles at a time but the court ordered to put them back in wild since the mother was confiscated from the smugglers.

CZA inventory on Sand boa: As per the Central Zoo Authority's inventory, In India 25 zoos kept 111 sand boas and in which 20M: 21F: 70U. But generally the scientific name of the species is mentioned as *Eryx conicus* (*Gongylophis conicus*). But it may not be a same species kept in all the zoos. Because India has four species of sand boas (including subspecies) and the concern zoo needs to verify their collections and identify the correct species name.

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