
Aruba Island Rattlesnake Fact Sheet (12/1/90)

Aruba Island Rattlesnake (*Crotalus unicolor*)

Description: The Aruba Island rattlesnake, also called the Aruban cascabel, is the one of the rarest rattlesnakes in the world. It is about three feet long and has distinctive markings in pale pink, blue and brown.

Range: The Aruba Island rattlesnake is found only on the southern end of the small volcanic island of Aruba, located in the Netherlands Antilles, 15 miles off the coast of Venezuela.

Habitat: The southern end of Aruba is a rocky, dry, largely uninhabited area which is sometimes referred to as cunucu land. It is covered with cactus scrub and other thorny plants. The snakes are usually found in rocky arroyos and adjacent hills.

Diet: Small lizards, frogs, mammals and birds are thought to make up the diet of the rattlesnake.

Social Organization: The mating season on Aruba lasts from September to January. Aruba Island rattlesnakes are live bearers rather than egg-layers, and five to twelve young are born sometime in the spring.

Conservation Status: It is not known how many Aruba Island rattlesnakes remain in the wild. It is listed as threatened in the IUCN Red Data Book and by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Threats to Survival: Only ten square miles of relatively undisturbed habitat remain on Aruba. Resort development and other forms of human encroachment are the biggest threat to the rattlesnake. In past centuries, much of the island's trees were cut down for charcoal and firewood, and some land was used for aloe cultivation. Introduced feral goats have wreaked havoc on the vegetation, even at the southern end of the island. There are also some concerns about the number of snakes being captured for pets or killed for their rattles. While export of the snake from the island is illegal, it has no other legal protection.

Zoo Programs -- SSP: The goal of the program is to have a genetically balanced population of 250 animals in the program. Currently there are over 100 snakes managed under the SSP. The Aruba Island government recently presented the SSP program with a gift of ten wild-caught snakes for the breeding program. One area of major concern is a Paramyxovirus

which has killed large numbers of snakes. A vaccine for the virus is currently being tested on several animals surplus to the breeding program. Additional vaccine trials are planned for the future. Another area of research is artificial insemination in these snakes determining whether female snakes can retain sperm from one season to the next, thus confusing studbook records.

Conservation: The cunucu land area has long been a candidate for becoming a national park on Aruba. A national park would protect several other native Aruba species along with the rattlesnake. Plans are underway to correct the feral goat problem and possibly seek to list the rattlesnake on the CITES Appendix II. A recently completed field study supported by the AZA and the Aruba Department of Agriculture should shed new light on the snake's current wild population and its natural history. Radio transmitters implanted in four snakes provided much information about home ranges, courtship and mating, and travel activity.

Education: The field study generated considerable interest among the people of Aruba, many of whom did not know the snake existed. Newspaper articles, television and radio programs, along with lectures by the researcher, Matthew Goode, promoted conservation of this part of Aruba's natural heritage. The rattlesnake was featured on Aruba postage stamps and even on new currency.

12/90