

## RACE RELATIONS

by  
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A recent classified advertisement in *Notes from NOAH* has roused me to make a comment on a disturbing trend in reptile marketing. The ad was something like this:

Hog Island boas (*Boa c. ssp.*), CB '96 beautiful, outstanding, totally unrelated to all existing in the U.S.!

And don't let me single out this example. Here are some other claims commonly seen:

"Locality Bred."

"Totally unrelated."

"Absolutely unrelated locality specific."

"Unrelated to any other animals anywhere."

With full knowledge that my observations will be regarded as heresy by many in the hatchling business, or those who might have "invested" heavily in "locality" or "unrelated" animals, I am still compelled to attempt to inject some reason into this situation, which I see as growing out of control and victimizing naive purchasers of captive stock. I am talking about the hypocrisy of the unrelated/locality craze.

Boas (or any small animal incapable of flight) from a small island cannot be "unrelated" to other available groups. The animals referenced in the ad by the obviously proud but overzealous breeders are in fact directly related to all other known groups, if they are Hog Island snakes. This is an indisputable, empirical fact.

The most egregious examples of this trend are the *alterna* and *Liclanura* crazies. In many respects, populations of these beautiful snakes exist under island-like conditions. Viable habitats (or perhaps just places where populations are available to collectors) can be separated by miles of waterless, coverless, roadless desert bottomland where it is at least popularly surmised communication and interbreeding is impossible or severely restricted. And indeed, population studies which give some clues as to the total area of travel these animals will normally attempt in a lifetime support the idea that over these species' substantial ranges, some insular populations do exist. Pending verifiable genetic studies, the jury is still out on the question of how much variation does exist.

Before I get too many people excited and seeking my demise, let me explain that I am a bona-fide *alterna* nut. The many greybands I have seen, collected, hatched and raised since 1974 have convinced me that substantive differences do exist in disparate

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populations, and that these differences are important. What I am refuting here are the ideas (A) that there is some recipe that can be used by people in New York or Utah or anywhere else to positively define the origin of a given specimen of *alterna*, and (B) that there are any real number of strictly unrelated locality animals available in the trade. These concepts are largely marketing hype.

Let's use as an example "Juno Road" *alterna*. The twenty-odd *alterna* I have taken from the areas adjacent to that specific Texas highway have exhibited colors from powder grey to black. They have been boldly saddled "Blairs" (nine to twenty-one blotches), and delicately lined "*alterna*," some with a near complete set of alternates. Saddle/band coloration ranges from blood red to black; nuchal marking lengths less than three scale rows long and more than a dozen, are known. Ventrals can be solid black or checkered, etc. Need I go on? Within a very broad range of colors and patterns, no one can say what is or is not a "Juno" animal. By the way, I've never seen a greyband in Juno, Texas.

Now let's take into consideration market forces. Due to the many stunningly beautiful animals produced over the last decade by persons not wholly committed to the locality notion, most first-time greyband buyers expect perfect light-phase "Blairs" or "*alterna*" or even the rarer charcoal and red forms, all of which are exceptions to the average wild populations. Well, the locality gurus are not going to disappoint the buying public! They scour their favorite rock cuts, hobnob with all their buddies, and they come up with similar locality stock that will produce those animals people want to buy.

So far so good.

Take into consideration that unless multiple males are involved, any clutch of *alterna* will be remarkably similar, not varied. Breeders know this and purposely pair those animals that will produce the desired "phases." Common sense tells us that this is also true of clutches laid in the wild, and that similar animals collected from small areas are very likely close relatives or littermates!

So when you are offered a beautiful hatchling by one of the locality breeders who brags to you that the parents were collected "on the very same cut" or even yards or feet apart (many areas offer very small collecting spots), do the math and understand that your new snake is the result of an orchestrated inbreeding project! No "buts" about it.

Incidentally, if you can't find a baby greyband that meets your approval in terms of size, weight, or color, don't let one of these guys tell you that the rarer the "locality" the uglier and more difficult to cultivate they are! Remember: A viable animal you will enjoy and value is the minimum requirement!

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All of the above could easily be applied to the rosy boa locality craze or many other groups of herps whose captive populations represent a really minute sampling of their wild counterparts. And what are we saying by buying into this unrelated must-be-locality business? All the work done in captive breeding is wasted? The only "real" animal is wild caught or F-1? This is contrary to the notions basic to the captive-first movement we espouse.

Let me put the brakes on what up to this point might seem like an unrelenting criticism of breeders, their methods, and their veracity. **We breeders are doing a terrific job** supplying the public with quality animals and relieving whatever pressures our hobby puts on wild populations of herps. But let's get serious and drop the pretense that our animals are strictly "unrelated," and that in reality breeding strictly unrelated animals would necessitate broadening our definition of "locality" or leave us with much less control over what our offspring are going to look like.

(In case you're wondering, I do have some really "rock-your-socks-off, ultra light-phase, not related to anything else, anywhere, locality stuff" to go along with all of my just average (wild caught) looking *alternata*.)

Thank you, and please, no hate mail!

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