

EXCREMENT EATING (COPROPHAGY) IN THE AUSTRALIAN MULGA SNAKE (*PSEUDECHIS AUSTRALIS*)

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Eating the excrement of other animals has been observed by me in the domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*) and bobtail skink (*Tiliqua rugosa*). The domesticated rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) is known to eat its own faeces. There is scant record of this in snakes and no previously published accounts for Australian species. Banks (1984) reports coprophagy in a Forest Cobra (*Naja melanoleuca*) and Wolfgang Wuster (pers. com.) observed this in a False Water Cobra (*Hydrodynastes gigas*).

A captive-bred subadult Mulga Snake (*Pseudechis australis*) in my care regularly eats defrosted adult mice but has recently been observed devouring its own dried faeces. No other aspect of this snake's behaviour nor the applied husbandry is remarkable. It is housed in a similarly furnished terrarium to other long-term captive individuals, although I have observed none of the others demonstrating coprophagy. Whether this behaviour is aberrant in this species can not be determined from this particular case as stomach contents analysis, as done by Shine (1987), would not necessarily confirm the existence of separately ingested faeces. Any faecal matter found forward in the digestive tract may be overlooked, or considered the result of secondary ingestion.

Anyone keeping this species will be aware of its disgusting habit of spraying its faeces over a large area. Even its hunting behaviour leaves a lot to be desired - when being fed it often opens its mouth and lunges forward attempting to swallow whatever it contacts.

I have observed individuals in my care attempting to swallow, or swallowing stones, water containers, sticks, sloughs, electric blanket and even the terrarium itself.

In this excrement-eating individual the behaviour is deliberate. It prods, nudges and pushes the dried faeces to free them from the paper substrate. Some difficulty is apparent though as it attempts to position the rigid meal longitudinally in its mouth for swallowing.

Fresh wet faeces are quickly avoided immediately the tongue comes into close contact with them.

If any Australian snake could be considered a "bottom-feeder" then it is the Mulga Snake - what a dag! This observation also demonstrates that recycling is not a human innovation, but has been ongoing in some other organisms long before we became involved with it!

REFERENCES

Banks, C.B. 1984. *Naja melanoleuca* (Forest Cobra Coprophagy. *Herp Review* 15 (4): 11.

Shine, R. 1987. The evolution of viviparity: Ecological correlates of reproductive mode within a genus of Australian snakes (*Pseudechis*: Elapidae). *Copeia* (3): 551-563.