

UNDERWATER OBSERVATIONS ON SEA SNAKE BEHAVIOUR

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SUMMARY

Sea snakes forage on the bottom but often bring prey to the surface to swallow. Surface activity not exclusively associated with feeding or breathing, sometimes occurs, especially at night. The skin is usually shed entire; it is loosened by rubbing against coral, curling and knotting or expanding the body. Courtship consists of the male swimming above the female and slightly behind her and then later pressing his body against hers while she rests on the sea bottom. Other topics are briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The book, *The Biology of Sea Snakes* (ed. W.A. Dunson, 1975), has summarized the literature on sea snakes and presented much new information; it has also served to indicate some of the gaps in current knowledge about this group of reptiles. One of the most conspicuous areas in which almost no data are available is the behaviour of the animals in their natural habitat. Few herpetologists are divers, and vice versa; only recently have undersea observations been made and information is still mostly fragmentary and opportunistic. The data we have collectively accumulated contribute to little-known areas of sea snake biology and we present them here. Underwater observations were made either by snorkeling or diving with SCUBA; timing was done with a Nivada-Grenchen underwater chronograph.

FEEDING

Except for the pelagic, surface-feeding *Pelamis platurus*, and perhaps *Lapemis hardwickii* which is reported to take prey at various levels of the water column (McCosker 1975), the food of most sea snakes would indicate that they capture prey on the bottom. Many, for example, eat burrowing eels, crevice-inhabiting fish, or species that are restricted to the bottom (McCosker 1975).