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Reptiles as Pets

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MELISSA KAPLAN

America's newest pet craze leaves millions of animals misunderstood and mistreated-right from the gecko.

Reptiles! The very word conjures up a variety of responses, ranging from "Eeeeww, gross!" to "Way cool!" Fueled in part by changes in international wildlife importation laws, the resurgence of interest in dinosaurs and increasing numbers of two-paycheck families that have less time and live in smaller spaces, reptiles have been the fastest-growing segment of the pet market. But popularity has its price.

According to the World Wildlife Fund-US, imports of reptiles into the United States exceeded 2.5 million in 1996. Add to this the tens of thousands of captive-bred reptiles sold at reptile expos around the country and at local herpetological society meetings, and you begin to understand why this fast-growing market is not likely to dry up anytime soon.

What does this mean to the person who wanders into the pet store for another bag of dog food and comes out with a snake and 10-gallon tank?

Trouble.

The biggest problem with reptiles is that most people think of them as disposable. Sadly, being cheap only tends to reinforce the "disposable" misconception.

THE GOOD

When it comes to reptiles, cold-blooded is a way of life, not a character trait. Reptiles are capable of recognizing people by voice, sight and smell; many are capable of learning. Some species actually benefit from interaction with humans. When cared for properly, all live as long or longer than mammalian pets of similar size.

There is no generic reptile. Reptiles have adapted over time to an amazing range of habitats and lifestyles, from underground to the tops of trees, from below sea level – and in the sea – to high up in the mountains. They are endlessly fascinating.

As the guardian of a reptile, you get to learn about everything from adaptation, behavior and the environment, to nutrition, camouflage and reproductive strategies. Learning about the natural history and proper captive care of these animals just might change your world outlook and get you thinking more about the environment as a whole.

THE BAD

Most reptiles are inexpensive. Some are downright cheap. This is why many reptile owners are unwilling to spend the money necessary to properly house and feed their reptiles, or provide them with the veterinary care they require. Comments such as "I'm not spending \$50 for a light and fixture!"; "Why spend any money at the vet? It's just a \$10 turtle – if it dies, it dies!"; "I'm just a teenager. I don't have that kind of money"; and, "It's my kid's responsibility, not mine" are too often heard by those of us doing reptile rescue and education.

As with other pets, the cost of a reptile is usually the least expensive part of keeping one. The initial outlay includes an enclosure, special heating and lighting, substrate, essential furnishings, food and water supplies,



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9:00 AM - 1:00 PM

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160 River Road
Lisbon, CT 06351

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SAT
JUL05

BARKS Adoption Day at Pet Goods

11:00 AM - 3:00 PM

Location:

Pet Goods of Roxbury
10 Commerce Blvd
Succasunna, NJ 07876

[Learn More >](#)

nutritional supplements, housing and food for prey insects and veterinary visits with parasite testing and treatment. Ongoing monthly expenses include cleaning and disinfecting supplies, new substrate, food and electricity.

How does this affect your wallet? The initial habitat setup for a \$10 green iguana hatchling will cost from \$250 to \$300, including an enclosure he will outgrow by the end of his first year. An anole, which retails for about \$4, has less-extensive requirements than a green iguana. Nevertheless, a basic anole habitat setup includes a 20-gallon enclosure, a UVB-producing fluorescent Vita-Lite®, a basking light, a nocturnal heat light, an undertank heating pad, thermometers, soil and gravel, potted plants, a log or branch for basking and sundry other items such as crickets, a tank for the crickets and cricket calcium supplements and food. Total cost, exclusive of monthly expenses: \$236.

THE NOT-SO-PLEASANT

What happens to reptiles when people realize they've made a horrendous mistake or simply get bored with them? Most get dumped on rescue organizations or animal shelters or are left to languish in substandard conditions. Intelligent but difficult iguanas end up in cold, dark enclosures in a back room or garage. Burmese pythons are crammed into tiny enclosures, fed barely enough to sustain life. Tortoises have their shell bones pierced to chain them to patios so they won't eat the garden. Iguanas, large monitor lizards and crocodilians are abandoned in alleys, parks, the outskirts of towns and at isolated lakes and creeks, often in climates where they will freeze to death in the winter. Fresh water turtles are "set free" in the ocean where they will die from exposure or salt water.

The most common reasons for getting rid of a reptile include not realizing how large or fast the species grows, nor how much work is involved in taming, feeding or overall maintenance. Many who do research after the fact are unwilling to commit the financial, time and space resources needed. The highly efficient metabolism of these animals means that they can conserve energy resources by staying cool and eating less food, which also means that it can take them a very long time to die. This misleads people into believing that they are providing adequate care. Unfortunately, treatment that would kill a mammal or bird in a matter of weeks or months may take years to kill a reptile.

IS A REPTILE THE RIGHT PET FOR YOU?

Are you looking for something out of the ordinary? Are you up to catering to dietary needs and thermal requirements that may be difficult or impossible to meet without significant financial resources? Buying prey in bulk when the size or type you need isn't available locally? Sacrificing an extraordinary amount of your living space to an appropriately sized enclosure?

Do you really want the reptile in question? If you are considering buying one because your children have been begging for one, keep in mind that you are ultimately responsible for the animal's daily care, including training, feeding, cleaning up, buying supplies and providing proper veterinary care. Even if your child is a teenager, all primary care and financial responsibilities are yours. Just saying "No, you can't have one" is not a bad thing. While we all want to indulge our children, teaching them why they can't have that reptile is just as important.

Can you feed one animal to another? Omnivores and carnivores need to be fed properly. That means you need to be able to feed out animals that many people consider too cute and cuddly to be food. Mammalian and avian prey should be pre-killed before feeding to your reptiles; it is more humane to the prey and protects your reptile from bite and scratch injuries. Can you humanely kill mice, rats, rabbits and chicks before feeding them to your pet? Fortunately, there are many sources of frozen prey that you can buy in bulk and store in your freezer and defrost as needed, assuming your family is up to having "mousicles" next to the Popsicles. Your prey-eating reptile won't be healthy as a vegetarian, nor can it be fed piecemeal – pieces of beef and chicken from the supermarket will cause malnutrition.

There are no herbivorous snakes and no small herbivorous lizards. Herbivorous tortoises require a great deal of indoor and outdoor space to move around in, as well as lots of grasses on which to forage. Herbivorous diets are more complicated and time-consuming to shop for and prepare than carnivorous diets. They are almost impossible to provide if you do not have access to markets with a wide and year-round selection of leafy greens and other nutrient-loaded vegetables. The pet store employee who told you to feed your herbivore just lettuce might as well have recommended styrofoam.

Giving away a reptile that doesn't suit you for whatever reason is still disposing of him or her. And disposing of reptiles, whether by letting them die from lack of proper care or giving them away to anyone who will take them, sends the same message to our children or students: it's okay to get rid of living things when they're inconvenient or unpleasant. Instead, we should be teaching that keeping a reptile is a lifelong commitment to a living, sentient being – a commitment that will last a long, long time. Depending on the species, lizards may live five to 20 years, snakes more than 40 years and turtles and tortoises 40 to 100 years or more.

WHERE TO LEARN ABOUT REPTILES

SAT
JUL05

Christmas in July - Pet Photos with Santa

11:00 AM - 3:00 PM

Location:

Pet Goods of Roxbury
10 Commerce Blvd
Succasunna, NJ 07876

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Become A Vet Assistant

ashworthcollege.edu/vet-assistant

Online Vet Technician School.
Accredited - Affordable - Get Info!

Pet stores are generally not the place to get accurate information on the care and temperament of reptiles. Most reptile pet care books at stores and libraries are outdated or contain a mixture of accurate and inaccurate information, enough to put a pet reptile at risk of injury or death.

There is a tremendous amount of reptile care information on the World Wide Web, ranging from comprehensive and accurate to dangerously inaccurate. You will need to evaluate the Web site material, as well as the author: that fancy site you found may have been written by a fourteen-year-old who knows more about computer graphics than she does about that iguana she's had for all of two weeks!

Another excellent place to learn about reptiles is through your local herpetological society. Reptile veterinarians, wildlife rescue organizations and animal shelters often know who the savvy "herpers" are in your community. The more you learn about the care of your selected species, the better you'll be able to sift through the available information and find that which is topical and accurate.

WHERE TO GET REPTILES

Never catch a reptile from the wild, and whenever possible, adopt. Many herp societies do reptile rescue and adoptions, as do independent reptile rescuers. While many of the animals available for adoption were turned in sick and injured, the rescues adopt out only healthy and recovered animals, or ones that need special care, to those able to provide that care. Expect to be screened carefully by the folks handling the adoptions, keeping in mind that they have the reptiles' best interests at heart. It is worth waiting a while for the species you are interested in, because over time, most species sold in the pet trade to hobbyists and pet keepers end up in shelters or rescues. Reptile veterinarians and animal shelters may also be sources of animals needing homes, as reptiles are often abandoned at both places, and the people there often hear about reptiles needing placement.

Support responsible captive breeding by buying directly from private breeders. You can find them through local herp society meetings and newsletters, and on the Internet in herp newsgroups and email lists. Some can be found selling their stock at regional herp expos and bazaars. Herp societies can be found on the Internet, as well as through your local wildlife rehabilitation center, humane society or animal shelter, exotics veterinarian, university biology department or the research librarian at your public library.

Caveat emptor applies to buying at expos; as many sellers and show organizers push quantity over quality and frequently sell sick imported animals. If you don't personally know the breeder or vendor, ask around before you buy. Some have been known to sell reptiles they know are sick, such as boas and pythons carrying fatal inclusion body disease. Others try to pass off imports as captive-bred.

Wherever you buy, learn first how to pick out healthy animals and resist impulse buys of species about which you have not done sufficient research. If a store or reseller tells you the animal is captive-bred- as opposed to wild-caught- ask for documentation in the form of sales receipts. Wholesalers and importers do not buy captive-bred animals from domestic breeders. If you aren't familiar with the name, ask the local herp people or Internet herp groups, or check the ads in herp magazines first.

It is your responsibility to make sure that keeping a reptile, or the type of reptile you want, is legal. Many cities and counties do not permit certain species or sizes. This doesn't mean stores can't sell them, so just because you see them for sale doesn't mean it's legal where you live. Go to the source: contact the department of animal regulation to find out what restrictions, if any, exist. If you rent an apartment or live in a dorm, check your lease and housing agreement: being caught with a reptile by your landlord or residential advisor could result in a quick eviction.

Finally, before bringing your new reptile home, be sure that you have already set up an enclosure for it, complete with appropriate substrate, lighting, heating and furnishings. Don't make your reptile wait until you have time to get everything together or can afford to get what he needs.

KEEPING REPTILES HEALTHY AND HAPPY

A frequently overlooked part of proper reptile care is good veterinary care. Very little time is spent in vet school learning about reptiles- and with more than 4,000 species, there is a lot to learn! Reptile veterinarians generally seek additional education, regularly attend reptile vet conferences, read specialist journals and online forums and cultivate a reptilian clientele. As with an enclosure, you should also have a good reptile veterinarian lined up before you bring the animal home. Make an appointment for an examination and fecal test within the first week or so.

Providing thorough reptile care information is outside the scope of this article. What follows is some basic information on common pet species:

- Temperate species are easier than tropical or montane species.
- Terrestrial and burrowing species are easier than arboreal.

- Carnivores are easier than omnivores, and both are easier than herbivores. Dried insects and powdered/pelleted/canned foods are not appropriate for lizards, snakes and tortoises.
- Nighttime heating cannot be provided by white light sources.
- Ultraviolet B (UVB) wavelengths, required by most omnivore and all herbivore species, do not sufficiently pass through glass or plastic enclosures or window glass.
- Some species require overhead radiant heat (RH) sources, as well as under-tank heating (UTH).
- Snakes and lizards are tenacious when it comes to escaping. Buy an enclosure with a built-in locking top; boards, books and aftermarket snap/clamp tops are not escape-proof.

THE FUTURE OF REPTILES AS PETS

Like it or not, reptiles are pets. With bargain basement wholesale prices there is no incentive for exporters, importers, wholesalers or pet stores to provide proper care and information. The welfare of reptiles is simply not cost effective.

But rather than ignore them, animal regulatory agencies, humane organizations and the Secretary of Agriculture, who is responsible for the Animal Welfare Act and the exclusion of reptile pets from this act, must begin to accord reptiles (and amphibians) the same protection under the local, state and federal laws granted to avian and mammalian pets. As long as "herps" are not afforded these protections, those individuals and organizations will be fighting an uphill battle to change the public's consciousness and moral response to the often horrendous conditions that these animals encounter in stores, warehouses, expos and homes.

Although no animal is truly easy to care for, few are so hard to find good information on or require as much work as reptiles. But keeping them properly opens the door to a whole new world. If that's what you are looking for in a pet, you won't be disappointed.

Melissa Kaplan is a reptile expert and rescuer who maintains an encyclopedic Web site on their care and other issues related to reptiles at www.anapsid.org.

"How much is that reptile in the window?"

Less and less, it appears:

- Anoles retail for as little as \$4.
- The price of green iguanas has dropped as low as \$10, down from the \$75 to \$125 they sold for in 1990.
- Wholesale prices for bulk purchases are so cheap that both anoles and green iguanas frequently are given away as prizes at county fairs, as red-eared slider turtles once were.
- Ball pythons wholesale at \$8 to \$10 and retail for \$30 to \$50.
- Hatchling Burmese pythons and boa constrictors sell for \$50, a dramatic reduction from the \$150 to \$300 they sold for less than a decade ago.
- The more common colored and patterned corn snakes go for \$20 to \$40.
- Many species of turtles and tortoises sell for less than \$50. -M.K.

YOU WANNA IGUANA? SEVEN REASONS TO JUST SAY NO!

It is hard to resist that little munchkin face, skinny limbs and big, liquid brown eyes. But the iguana, the most commonly imported reptile, is also the most commonly dumped and improperly cared for of all reptiles. If you're still considering adopting one, consider this:

1. That teeny lizard will grow more than 12 inches per year for the first several years, eventually becoming five to six feet and 12 to 18 pounds of sandpaper skin and razor-sharp tail and claws.
2. Iguanas have 116 to 120 teeth that, like sharks' teeth, are replaced throughout their lives. They are one of the primary reasons that so many iguana keepers end up on very friendly terms with their plastic surgeon and the local emergency room staff.
3. Salmonella is the other. Reptile salmonellosis can be far more serious than the types found in our own food chain.
4. A healthy adult iguana essentially needs its own room, a space at least eight to 10 feet wide by three feet deep and six feet high, with a bathing pool or tub, and it must be kept at tropical temperatures and humidity all year round. Two iguanas require even more space. These aren't lizards you tuck away in the corner of your living room or children's room.

5. Iguanas are vegans with complex dietary and environmental needs. Improper diet and environment too often lead to iguanas dying or becoming deformed from metabolic bone disease and other nutritional disorders.

Bottom line: your iguana needs to eat better than you do.

6. Kidney failure due to being fed animal protein or being kept in too dry an environment is the leading – and very painful – cause of death at a relatively young age.

7. Iguanas can be wonderful pets for those willing to accommodate the environmental, diet and behavioral issues. But the fact that more than 15,000 are given away every year indicates that they aren't so wonderful for so many who buy or adopt them. -M.K.

SNAKE AID

PROTECT THE UGLY ANIMALS, TOO. For Robert Shapiro, those are words to live by. Not only are they emblazoned on a T-shirt produced by his New York City-based company, Social Tees, but spend some time with him and you'll see that those are words he lives by, too.

For starters, there's Mango, a Southeast Asian monitor lizard and the shop's mascot. The reptile was brought into the city's Center for Animal Care and Control six months ago with a large wound- origin unknown- on his right side. Today, thanks to Shapiro, he's healed and healthy.

Mango isn't the only critter to benefit from Shapiro's tender loving lizard care. As the city's official—and volunteer—reptile rescuer for the past four years, Shapiro has set up a safe haven in his shop's back room for New York's abused and abandoned snakes, lizards and turtles. About 3,000 animals come through Shapiro's doors annually, and they're cared for until ready to be placed with experienced, licensed owners.

"Last month, park rangers brought me ball pythons, iguanas and an African spur tortoise that someone had let loose in Central Park," says Shapiro. He also takes in giant constrictors surrendered to the New York Herpetological Society and illegally imported animals confiscated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

As a crusader for critters low on cuddle factor, Shapiro knows reptiles are underdogs when it comes to public sympathy. "There's no such thing as a mean snake, just a frightened one," says Shapiro. Half the battle, he explains, is understanding how reptiles think; the other half is ensuring that anyone who chooses a pet reptile also chooses to be responsible about it. "That means somebody who reads a good book and sets up a proper environment before they buy the animal," says Shapiro. "Even one good care sheet can save a life."

For more information, call Robert Shapiro at (212) 614-9653.

-Pune Dracker

When it just isn't working out...

- Don't let the reptile go in your backyard, the park or a nearby wild area. Not only is this illegal, it poses a serious health threat to the local wild populations.
- Don't give the reptile to the first (or fifth) person to come along and say, "Cool! I'll take it!" Whenever possible, take the time to screen prospective homes.
- Rather than running an ad in your local paper, place an ad in your local herp society newsletter, notify the local reptile rescue group or other rescue and humane societies in your state.
- Use an adoption application form as a guideline for interviewing applicants. One can be found online at www.sonic.net/melissk/adoptionapp.html.
- If your reptile is seriously ill and you cannot find a proper home for him or her, take the animal to a veterinarian for a humane lethal injection. It is the only way to humanely euthanize a reptile.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

CyberReptiles

Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians

<http://www.arav.org>

Melissa Kaplan's Anapsid.org

<http://www.anapsid.org>

Mark Miller's Herpetology.com

<http://www.herpetology.com>