

## COMMENTARY

# The Case Against Captive Reptiles and Amphibians

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Photographs by the author.

Keeping animals as pets is an accepted facet of American society. Domestic cats hold the number one spot followed by dogs, rodents and rabbits, birds, and finally, reptiles. Approximately 10% of the US population keeps reptiles and amphibians as pets: 3 million ‘herps’ are in private ownership. What is the state of affairs for captive reptiles and amphibians? How are reptiles and amphibians like other pet animals and how are they different? Are necessary resources available? These include veterinary attention, knowledgeable husbandry practitioners, nutritious foods, and useful supplies for owners to care for their pets properly. Simply stated, can we do a good job for a captive herp? If not, why? What are the consequences of our failures?

Ray Ashton’s “Commentary from an Old Naturalist About Exotic Species and a New Herpetocultural Ethic,” (*Iguana* 12(1), March 2005) inspired me to think anew about reptile- and amphibian-related animal welfare and conservation issues. While we warrant a new ethic toward this group of animals, my

conclusions start and end at a very different spot: I am a “new herper” who hopes to end the practice of keeping reptiles and amphibians in captivity.

Ashton referred to himself as an ‘old naturalist’ interested in reptiles and amphibians since childhood, and one of a small minority whose curiosity had been piqued by these animals. Conversely, ‘new herpers’ may come later to such interests and are more easily able to join study societies, interest groups, and have other resources available that simply didn’t exist a generation ago.

In his commentary, Ashton ostensibly offers seven useful and logical steps toward responsible reptile and amphibian ownership. These ideas are often repeated in hobby journals, internet groups, and countless herpetological societies. Using the Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*), a very common and most neglected, discarded, unwanted, and abused reptilian pet for the basis of my discussion, we can see that Ashton’s set of rules is difficult to follow or achieve.

1. **Learn about your pet.** Purchasing and reading a book about the common Green Iguana won’t necessarily provide an owner with correct, up-to-date husbandry information. Some publishers are unscrupulous about their editions, updating a photo here and there so a new copyright date hides gross inaccuracies. New books can also be poorly written and edited, directing a motivated owner toward a potentially fatal husbandry mistake. Few single sources provide all the knowledge we need about any one species.
2. **Only purchase captive bred animals.** Discussions regarding Captive Bred (CB) versus Wild Caught (WC) are largely rhetorical. Removing wild animals for introduction into the pet trade will negatively effect a wild population. Yet, we rarely consider the fate of CB reptiles and amphibians. Questions remain — how well can we care for a CB reptile or amphibian? Is our care humane? Potential suffering of a CB animal must be considered of equal importance to that of a wild-caught animal.
3. **Provide secure caging and lighting.** We can build escape-proof cages and provide UVB lighting — but we do not yet



Pablo is a recent arrival at Colorado Reptile Humane Society (CoRHS). Even among the few Green Iguanas that survive captivity, few live out their entire natural lifespan of 20–30 years in the care of a single owner.

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know how much UVB lighting is enough or too much. Many other habitat elements also need consideration: climate, seasonal weather, visual breaks, height versus area, etc.

4. **Provide appropriate food.** Nutritional research focused on longevity versus breeding is scarce, as are commercially available diets based on such research. Most owners cannot offer natural foods for *I. iguana* in captivity. It is time-consuming and tiresome to prepare fresh foods daily.
5. **Consider habitat size.** What percentage reduction in space is tolerable when housing a lizard that typically roams an acre of area in its natural habitat? If we house a single adult *I. iguana* in a bedroom (10 x 12' = 120 sq. ft.), we've removed more than 99.7% of its normal home range. Is this acceptable? Even a 2000 sq. ft. house represents only 5% of a normal habitat.
6. **When you need to 'get rid of' your pet.** No animal should be sent to an uncertain fate, released in a park, a stream, from a moving car, or any other cruel method that causes unnecessary stress, injury, or death. Animal welfare thinking encourages pet ownership *for the life of the pet*, not the fluctuating interest of the owner. Is a profit-motivated pet store a good avenue for an unwanted animal? Shelters and rescuers are unable to re-home all Green Iguanas that come through their doors. No one wants another iguana. Euthanasia is often the outcome when an owner "exit strategy" is implemented.
7. **Avoid confrontations with non-herpers.** Respecting your neighbors always makes sense when you house any animal. No one likes a barking dog, bird killing 'barn cat,' or other at-large pet. Fear of snakes is especially deeply felt, regardless of legitimate danger. However, negative reactions from individuals or politicians should not be seen as unthinking. Many concerns about keeping wild animals as pets are reasonable.

Reptiles and amphibians are readily available for sale or trade from outlets that include retail stores, internet sellers, and breeder's shows. In my home state of Colorado and other states in the US, certain species may be legally taken from their wild habitats and held in captivity. The average owner follows few of the points outlined in Mr. Ashton's list, purchasing whichever reptile or amphibian they desire with little or any research regarding care, longevity, and nutrition. However, even the most dedicated and educated owners, supporting the pet trade through the purchase of a CB reptile or amphibian, subject a wild animal to a life of imprisonment and often a reduced life span, even in the absence of predators. Why is this acceptable?

We have not truly domesticated any reptile or amphibian; I will therefore conclude that CB animals are as wild as their WC counterparts. CB reptiles and amphibians may be more or less acclimated to life near or with humans; they may or may not display aggressive behaviors to territorial intruders or other encounters and experiences. They may or may not make 'good' wild animals since, as often as not, breeders keep alive every hatchling regardless of fitness. To declare an animal unable to withstand the pressure of a life in its wild habitat does not make it any less wild. The individual animal would have simply met demise early in its natural life.



A malformed Three-toed Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina triunguis*) suffered from an insufficient diet and a lack of ultraviolet light.

Moving from the difficulties of caring for reptiles and amphibians in captivity, a far more important question needs addressing: On what grounds do we humans have the right to impose captive conditions on wild animals? Combined with the problems of invasive exotic species, Mr. Ashton should not be surprised that some 'new herpers' wish to curtail reptile and amphibian ownership for both the wild animals themselves and for good stewardship of native populations. While we may possess a legal right to keep reptiles and amphibians in captivity, I suggest that we lack the moral right to keep a wild animal captive for our own personal benefit or other financial or emotional needs, whether it is captive bred or wild caught.

Much of my ethos regarding reptiles and amphibians stems from experiences as the founder and director of a small humane society in Colorado that is dedicated to this group of animals. Through my work, I have personally appreciated many reptiles and amphibians. From this familiarity has grown a profound sadness for these wild animals that are captive solely as a consequence of human folly.

The new generation of reptile and amphibian owners does not share any values beyond possession — any more than Ford automobile owners or ice cream purchasers constitute a distinct socio-economic, other demographic, or moral class. Old herpers, Mr. Ashton declares, were interested in learning about wild animals — "but were also excited about keeping them in captivity." I have no doubt that this is true. Keeping and breeding reptiles and amphibians generated great enthusiasm among pet owners — but at what cost to the animals? I am confident that a thorough investigation will clearly answer Mr. Ashton's shock toward those of us who would see the end of the worldwide trade in reptilian and amphibian pets:

- When the best and most resourceful owners cannot provide even a small percentage of the real estate a wild animal has in its natural habitat, we have failed that animal.
- When nutrition research focused on longevity (not breeding) is scarce, when the foremost veterinary medical text is a mere 512 pages for all species of reptiles and amphibians,

when we have no antibiotics or other drugs designed for even a single species, we have failed.

- When reptile and amphibian owners cause immense suffering and death to at least 500,000 Green Iguanas each year in the US alone — and who knows the numbers for other species — we have failed.
- When we refuse to recognize that most captive-breeding programs bring into existence wild animals doomed to a life in captivity, we have failed.

After seven years of sheltering and euthanizing unwanted reptiles and amphibians, I would suggest that the average individual with a typical amount of space, time, and funds is simply not equal to the responsibilities of owning a pet reptile or amphibian — even if it began as an appropriate endeavor. In fact, most reptile and amphibian owners surrendering their animals to the Colorado Reptile Humane Society can probably tell you more about the attributes of their cell phone and calling plan contract than the live animal of which they now wish to rid themselves. Like all bell curves, a few humans do a great job for their pets, a few would meet a legal definition as perpetrators of cruelty, and the great majority provide mediocre care. Mediocre care to millions of reptiles and amphibians seems to me something old naturalists and new herpers ought to oppose collectively. Does the fact that an amphibian or reptile was captive-bred really matter?

Can we learn from our myriad failures and experiences? Some will answer that better research will yield the knowledge we presently lack, that educated owners will improve husbandry issues, and that we can protect our native ecosystems from invasive species. My experiences tell me otherwise. On a typical afternoon at the Colorado Reptile Humane Society's shelter, one owner who 'got rid of' his Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*) because she was 'too boring' was already planning the purchase

of a chameleon. Another owner brought forth an iguana with an advanced type of metabolic bone disease, misdiagnosed by a veterinarian. The owner had provided UVB lighting, but it was too far away from the lizard to be useful. Red-eared Sliders (*Trachemys scripta*) are dumped by the dozens after outgrowing aquaria that were never large enough. Who is going to house an unwanted (and unsocialized) 4.5' Black-throated Monitor (*Varanus albigularis* spp.)? He was surrendered because his fecal material "smelled bad." Owners do not often advance their own education beyond "Cool — a reptile!" These animals forfeit their natural lives on human whim.

A realistic accounting of how captive reptiles and amphibians endure our lack of largesse would convince most individuals that we only rarely meet the lowest bar of care standards — and that wild animals should remain wild animals. I often counsel would-be adopters of North American box turtles (*Terrapene* spp.) that these turtles roam about two football fields worth of habitat. Subjecting box turtles to life in a 55-gallon aquarium is equivalent to a human living out the rest of her life in a small bathroom — and without internet, cell phone, or other stimuli. As North American box turtles experience a near 70% predation rate on relocation, they cannot be released. However, for permanent captives, we can raise the standards we allow to pass for captive husbandry.

Let me propose a less than radical notion toward reptiles and amphibians: Acknowledge them as the wild animals they are and operate as their conservation advocates and wardens, keeping them and their needed ecosystems protected in our world — and out of all living rooms. Reptiles and amphibians are not appropriate personal pets, any more than we would reasonably consider mountain lions, hippos, or ostriches. If they were larger, vocal, and able to harm us more easily and more often, I suspect they would no longer be such a popular part of



Rosie, a Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*), now a permanent resident of the Butterfly Pavilion ([www.butterflies.org](http://www.butterflies.org)), is seen here atop her tree bower.



This Ornate Monitor (*Varanus ornatatus*) is now deceased. An animal that can attain a length of two meters, has a naturally aggressive disposition, and requires a largely aquatic habitat is a questionable choice as a pet for most people.

the pet trade. We can shut down the introduction of new individuals and new species of reptile and amphibians into the pet trade — and greatly reduce suffering and death. These ideals should inform a true conservation ethic.

A conservation ethic might include captive breeding to increase the chances for a species' survival — but wild animals that exist only as captive specimens are already lost to our natu-

ral world. We assure a species' survival when we realize the animal can function as a wild animal only in its natural habitat. Captive breeding for release must already encompass habitat preservation and management — without which release is impossible.

We need a conservation-focused ethic — for the reptiles and amphibians we hope to protect and not for the reason of continued ownership of wild animals in our homes. Conservation needs to occur because, as Mark Beckoff observed, the human race has already won the race — and included in our winner's 'spoils' could be a greater future for reptiles and amphibians than captive animals suffering and dying for short-term enjoyment. As winners, we could instead be generous toward these often-misunderstood animals, protecting them in the wild, while reducing and eliminating their human-imposed captivity.

As a model for enjoying reptiles and amphibians in the wild, we could duplicate many of the elements of bird watchers. Life-long species lists (without taking herps from the wild!), reptile-watching trips, photography contests, and reptile conservation societies could greatly contribute to the protection of these wonderful species — all without subjecting them to captivity or an early demise. Instead, land could be protected for habitat, and participants could help collect useful data and assist researchers and conservationists.

The natural world is a wonderful place and to rediscover, as most of us do, that it contains reptiles and amphibians, should be exciting. I can conceive of no better gift than to leave wild animals wild, hippo and herp alike.



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