

# The Reptile Keeper: A Letter to the General Public

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In the 21st century, one would think that others would be much more open minded about others. “Live and let live” seems like it would be a more readily accepted philosophy. Yet, unfortunately, people who find interests in things that are outside of the norm are still looked at as “weirdos” and “odd-balls”. Reptile keepers tend to fall into that category for a great many of the general public. They find interest in animals that can’t fetch a ball, don’t appear to be happy to see you, and won’t bark at intruders. In addition to that, there’s a stereotype that is often applied to reptile keepers. There seems to be an idea out there that most reptile keepers are either hippies, drug dealers/addicts, or tattooed and pierced all over their bodies, and worship Satan.

The truth of the matter is, reptile keepers are a wide and varied bunch. There’s greater diversity between the types of people who keep reptiles than there likely is collectively across the globe. Different people from all walks of life, religious beliefs, and careers keep reptiles as pets in their dwellings. Some people are unable to have a “normal” pet because of allergies. Reptiles make more suitable pets for some, simply because they don’t have to worry about the pet dander that makes them miserable.

## Why Reptiles?

Reptiles are unique and intriguing animals. Each species fits a specific niche in the ecosystem and they have specific biological traits which enable them to survive in that environment. Not all “pets” really require interaction opportunities with playing, fetching balls, cuddling on the couch and teaching tricks. Reptiles offer little in the way of affection, but they do make up for it in interesting habits and behaviors which make them fun to observe and learn from. Different species have different food preferences and different methods of securing said food. They have different behavioral characteristics, often depending on temperatures and time of year. Reptiles come in all sizes, shapes and colors. Some are easy to care for and others are more complex. Much the same as with different dog breeds. Some dogs are easier to care for by someone who isn’t physically active and others are best suited for someone that has an active lifestyle. Some can be kept in an apartment dwelling, while others it is recommended to have a house and a sizeable yard.

### But can't reptiles be dangerous?

As stated above, reptiles come in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors. Most species are smaller and really aren't capable of inflicting any serious wounds. Some can attain quite large sizes and under the right circumstances are capable of inflicting serious injuries or even causing death. However, the same goes for those who keep horses, cattle or even some larger breed dogs. Human deaths have been attributed to each of those mentioned annually. Reptiles account for a VERY small number of deaths and this is over a 10+ year span. Even among the reptiles that are capable of taking a life, their ownership is much like driving a car. It's only as dangerous as YOU make it. Experienced keepers have been more than successful at maintaining these animals without conflict for decades. While it is not recommended to jump into keeping the more advanced reptile species before you're ready, maintaining them is not at all impossible and has been done successfully for quite some time. Research and patience is key.

### Wouldn't they be happier back in the wild?



While it comes as no surprise that the initial specimens which started the current reptile pet trade were captured from the wild, the vast majority of the current captive animals are captive produced and not just by a single generation. Many have been here for decades, through many generations of captive breeding efforts. These animals have never been in the wild. While survival instinct with reptiles (unlike mammals) is genetically integrated, and there is little doubt that they could survive if released in the appropriate environment, these animals do not live a lavish lifestyle in the wild. In captivity (and under proper care), they are given regular meals, regular access to clean water, veterinary care when necessary, and no parasitic infestations plaguing them. They are not subjected to habitat loss or predation. They are not killed by deforestation or by locals who simply don't like them because they're a reptile. Life

in the wild is tough. There's no guarantees on food access. They're constantly preyed upon by others, and often unsuccessfully which results in physical injuries that they have to suffer with for prolonged periods. They are frequently pushed out of their territory by more dominant specimens and many are losing their homes to the ever growing human population. They get heavy parasite loads which tends to result in the animal deteriorating earlier in life than we've seen them do so in captivity. Captivity may not be perfect, but well established specimens do just fine and have proven to have a longevity much greater than their wild counterparts.

## Why do animal rights activists say they make horrible pets?



There are special interest organizations out there that repeatedly make false claims about exotic animal keepers. Reptile keepers are often at the forefront of their attacks. Organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Born Free USA, and a number of others fight against the private possession of alternative pets. They greatly exaggerate claims of deaths due to the more challenging species, and even when they're being honest on the numbers, they do their best to make it sound like an astronomical number. They take

isolated cases of unscrupulous dealers who have been caught illegally importing species and blow them out of proportion to sound as if it is the common practice of the reptile trade.

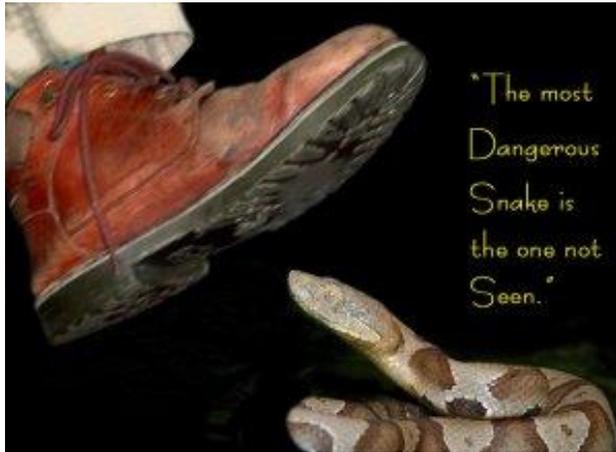
As with ANY industry, there are "bad actors" who cast a dark shadow over the rest of us. However, the vast majority of breeders and dealers take pride in their animals. They ensure that their animals get the very best, because ensuring that makes near certain that any offspring produced will be of higher quality. Many of these species tend to be easier to start on captive bred food sources (usually captive bred, humanely euthanized rodents, etc.) and also tend to be much more personable. An animal born into a captive setting, knows only captivity. Their caretakers are what they are familiar with and the stress factor is greatly reduced.

Additionally, even of the more dangerous reptiles there are to keep, the most dangerous part of them is the hype they get from the media. The grand majority of these animals have little desire to do their keepers any harm. This is no different from wild specimens, which also don't wish to inflict harm on people. They merely defend themselves when provoked, nothing less and nothing more. There are occasions when a keeper falls complacent or tries to push the boundaries of their relationship with the animal they keep and occasionally this can result in severe injuries...or worse. This is no different than those with livestock and horses. People underestimate their animals and fall complacent with them often, resulting in severe injuries and in some cases the loss of a life. This is a personal choice by those who choose to keep them and the risk is well known, much like it is with driving a motor vehicle. People have car accidents every single day and people lose their lives every single day due to these accidents. You know full well that this can happen the minute you step into your vehicle and turn the ignition. Reptile keepers are no different and have simply accepted a different liability.

## But what about the public? Aren't reptiles a danger to us?

Most reptiles that are kept as pets are entirely harmless. Of course, anything with a mouth can bite and if they have claws, they're capable of scratching. The same goes for dogs and cats. People are repeatedly taken into ER's to be treated for dog and cat bites. In fact, dog bites are much more severe than the

grand majority of reptile bites. However, for argument's sake, we'll focus on the main concern categories. Those are large predatory reptiles, venomous reptiles and of course the concern of salmonella.



*Photo courtesy: John White*

Large predatory reptiles are generally capable of doing some serious damage if handled in a manner lacking the necessary respect. However, they are not vicious, outgoing creatures that are out to hunt and kill anything that moves. Reptiles are the ultimate energy conservationists. They only use what energy is necessary to secure a meal, when it is necessary. Most of the time, these meals consist of smaller prey...not animals that tower above them. In the off-chance of the escape or release of one of these animals, the risk to you and your family is essentially non-existent.

Venomous reptiles are a category all within themselves. The reason for this is because the method of properly caring for them is a bit different. Venomous snakes and lizards should only be kept by experienced keepers who understand the occupational hazards and precautions involved with keeping these animals. Venomous reptile keepers should utilize an escape-proof room and the animals themselves also kept in locked cages. When cleaning their cages, the animals are handled with special tools that enable them to safely maneuver the animal into a secondary lockable holding cage until their primary enclosure is cleaned. Once the enclosure is cleaned, the process is reversed and the animal is placed back within its primary confinement. But, of course, the question remains... what if one were to escape? Isn't this a danger to everyone around them? The truth of the matter is that these animals have as little desire to be anywhere near you as you would them. They have no desire to have a confrontation with you and if you obey the same guidelines as you would staying safe from your native venomous snakes... you would be in no danger from these either. We must reiterate that only experienced keepers with proper resources should have, or even consider keeping, venomous reptiles.

When encountering a snake in the wild:

- Do not approach any snake that you can't readily and confidently identify.
- Do not place hands and feet under or behind anything in which you can't easily see what's behind it. Snakes like to hide in darker, tight spaces to stay away from predators. You placing your hand in their hiding spot makes them think they are being pursued and can result in them biting in defense.
- When a snake is spotted, keep all pets and kids away from it. Keep a watchful eye on where it goes and if you find it necessary, contact a snake removal specialist to capture and relocate it.

If you can follow the above steps, you can stay safe from any snake...native or otherwise. The most dangerous snake is the one not seen. If you can see them, you can stay safe from them and they can stay safe from you.

### Now what about this salmonella business? I mean, that's a pretty major concern with reptiles, right?

When it comes to salmonella, it's a potential concern regardless what animal you have. This includes dogs and cats. In fact, you're at a greater risk of it with dogs and cats. Salmonella is shed in the fecal matter of practically all animals...including us. Dogs are capable of transmitting salmonellosis through fecal matter and saliva when they are infected. The concern with reptiles and salmonella was an issue back in the 1970s, mostly from turtle farms. Farmed turtles were fed raw chicken meal in the ponds which resulted in salmonella transmission. This is no longer a practice and as such the concern is no longer an issue. Further, simple good hygiene practices are all that is required to avoid salmonella transmission to humans. If children handle reptiles, ensuring that they are not placing hands in mouths shortly afterwards is obviously a good decision. Once all handling for the day is complete, then a thorough washing of hands is always a good practice. This simple protocol will prevent a salmonella infection from ever being a concern.

### But, what about the Burmese pythons in the Everglades? Isn't this the result of irresponsible reptile owners?

While the topic of non-native/invasive species is one that would require an article all within itself, it's important to understand that this is not as simple as the media is making it out to be. While technically the initial release of Burmese pythons came from captive stock, it is NOT due to irresponsible pet owners releasing their animals. An importer/breeder facility in South Florida was hit by Hurricane Andrew in 1992. The destruction of that facility resulted in the initial release of approximately 900 baby Burmese pythons. Those animals were the ones that started the initial population.

Unfortunately, the science behind their establishment and projected expansion were incredibly flawed. Yet this flawed science, which did NOT undergo true peer-review as most science is intended to do so, was passed as infallible fact. This situation is more political than it is scientific. Again, we would require an entire article dedicated to this topic to address all the points and one of which will be immediately following this one. Until then, we hope you'll be mindful of the reality that not all is as it seems or is being made out to be.

### What value do pet reptiles have for the rest of us?

One important reason why reptile pets are so valuable, is education. People have feared snakes and other reptiles since our origins. Most of this is due to the unknowns. Natural fear of what we don't understand has perpetuated a hatred for reptiles, especially snakes, by mankind for as long as we can remember. Responsible interaction with these animals has opened MANY eyes to the world of reptiles. Without captive representatives of these animals, most people would not have any clue as to vast variety of reptiles to be found around the world, or even in their back yards. People having the ability to experience these animals up close and personal has opened many eyes to their plight and has

gathered more support for their conservation efforts. The ability to connect people with these animals and understand them better makes all the difference in the world. These animals become ambassadors for their species, gaining public interest in protecting rainforests and more. Further, a number of reptile enthusiasts utilize money earned through captive breeding efforts to fund conservation projects in other parts of the world where little money is often spent on such purposes. Reptile owners ARE the advocates for these animals. The animals themselves do much of the talking on their own once people get to experience them. Reptile keepers are not odd-balls and weirdos. We simply have a more open mind to the amazing creatures found all over the world and we are intrigued with their biological designs, habits and behaviors.

Please stand with us in our fight to preserve our rights to continue to be the voices for these animals. While every group has their troublemakers and bad apples, collectively our hearts are in the right place and we try to do amazing things for these animals in their natural environments. We want our children and our children's children to be able to take a trip across the world and see these animals in their natural habitats because we did something about it TODAY to make that possible. Stand with us and help make a difference. Right now they're making their case against reptile owners, but that is just the start. If you give animal rights activists the opportunity, they will build cases against "domestic" pet owners as well. Reptile keepers are simply an easy target. However, we stand firm in our stance that reptile owners are a valuable asset to conservation and education and we will continue to fight as it is the only hope these animals have left.