

# Cold-



This slender-snouted crocodile seized by the Milwaukee Area Domestic Animal Control Commission is just one of the thousands of reptiles who end up at shelters every year. What can be done to help them—and to keep shelter staff safe?

# Blooded Complications



Shelters and rescues struggle to care for reptiles sold as “loss leaders”

BY JANET WINIKOFF

**On Dec. 12, 2012, authorities in Lake Elsinore, Calif.,** were shocked when they entered Global Captive Breeders Inc. Tipped off by investigators from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, they discovered more than 600 half-dead snakes and 18,400 dead and dying rodents.

“On the reptile side it was pretty much one large massive shipment from Indonesia ... snakes, monitor lizards, Tokay geckos; various different kinds of boas, large snakes, small snakes, black tree monitors, emerald boas and hybrid boas. And baby leopard tortoises ... their shells were just fracturing; they were so malnourished,” recalls Cindy Machado, director of animal services for Marin Humane Society (MHS), which helped with the case. “Most of the animals were subjected to disease and neglect and were rapidly deteriorating. ... It was really, really awful.”

As shelters and rescue groups struggle to aid traditional pets like dogs and cats affected by overpopulation,

neglect and abandonment, they are now faced with another group of animals needing their help: reptiles.

## A Growing Problem

They may not be as common as dogs and cats, but reptiles are steadily gaining in popularity. From 1994 to 2008, the number of U.S. households that own a reptile rose from 2.8 million to 4.7 million, an increase of 68 percent, according to a 2011 report from The American Pet Products Association (APPA).

The APPA National Pet Owner’s Survey places the number of captive “pet” reptiles at somewhere between 11.5 and 13 million. The report says the U.S. reptile industry has grown from “a marginal side business for a few pet stores to a complex industry with annual revenues approaching \$1.4 billion.”

Reptile mutations resulting in animals who look different from the common species—known as “morphs”—target consumer demand for variety. Morphs are now

## reptiles in the pet trade

bred in every size, shape, color and pattern. The bearded dragon, a lizard whose skin should match the dull reddish-brown and gray soil of its home in the Australian outback, now comes in designer colors like “sand fire,” “ruby red,” “tangerine” and “snow.” The naturally reddish-orange corn snake is available in “lavender,” “strawberry,” “caramel ice” and “candy cane,” while pythons capable of swallowing a corgi are marketed with elegant shades like “coral glow,” “bumblebee,” “fire pewter,” “sun glow” and “salmon.” But problems arise when reptiles are produced for looks with no regard for health. Bred for its unique dark barbed-wire pattern, “spider” ball pythons can inherit a neurological defect causing them to wobble their heads when they’re excited or stressed.



Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County staff members Tonya Martinez, Landy Paxson and Ilka Daniel measure a 9-foot python captured in July 2013.

Big-box pet stores that long ago folded to public pressure to stop selling dogs and cats still often stock multiple types of reptiles and amphibians. “As the demand for unique reptiles and amphibians stretches worldwide, a wide variety of reptiles is a must-have for any pet store,” wrote John Mack in a December 2013 column for *Pet Age*. Reptiles not found at conventional pet stores can be purchased at specialty shops, through online breeders and Craigslist.

Reptile shows and expos are another popular outlet for buying, selling and trading animals. More than 100 reptile shows occur annually in Moose lodges, hotel convention areas and fairgrounds across the United States. These events can draw thousands of reptile enthusiasts, who move from one vendor’s booth to the next, eagerly purchasing animals. Machado says this practice is more like collecting coins than adopting a

pet. “They never say, ‘This is my snake.’ They’ll say, ‘This is part of my collection.’”

Some reptiles come with a hefty price tag, but a greater number are considered “loss leaders”—products sold cheaply to stimulate pet supply sales. Pet stores now have entire aisles devoted to processed reptile foods, live crickets and worms, tanks, heat lamps, thermometers, UVB lights, basking rocks, fake plants, calcium supplements and multivitamins. Mack recently equated reptile sales to selling cheap computer printers. “Selling reptile supplies is often far more profitable than selling the animals themselves; one could compare the practice to that of a home printer: Even if you’re not making money selling the printer, you’ll more than make up for it on the ink.”

“The bottom line is that it’s a billion-dollar industry, and where [the animals] come from is always questionable,” Machado says.

### Reptiles’ Impact on Shelters

The mind-boggling number of reptiles bought and sold as pets is quickly translating into issues of abandonment, escape, hoarding, neglect and abuse for animal shelters and rescue groups. Unable to handle the volume of unwanted reptiles, many wildlife sanctuaries and zoos that once welcomed unusual animals are turning them away. The result is that animal control officers, shelters and rescue groups—often woefully untrained in handling and caring for reptiles—are being forced to deal with the crisis. That can mean a delicate dance: Many of these animals shouldn’t be pets in the first place, and finding homes or accredited facilities that are truly equipped to provide proper care is a challenge.

“If reptiles were as cool and easy to care for as too many people think they are, then reptile rescue groups, herpetological and humane societies wouldn’t be getting literally dozens of calls a week from people trying to give away their reptiles,” says reptile expert and author Melissa Kaplan. “They generally call me after they have found that no one has beat down their doors trying to buy their reptile, and that the pet stores or breeders from whom they originally bought their animal, and zoos and wildlife educators and refuges don’t have any more room for cast-off pets” she writes on her reptile care website, [anapsid.org](http://anapsid.org).

Ann-Elizabeth Nash, founder of the Colorado Reptile Humane Society (CoRHS) says most people who buy reptiles aren’t getting the information they need regarding their care. Her Longmont rescue receives an average of 350 unwanted reptiles annually.

“We mostly see animals that are easy to purchase but hard to care for ... green iguanas, ball pythons and pond turtles,” says Florida Fish and Wildlife

Conservation Commission (FWC) adoption coordinator Liz Barraco.

After several reptile seizures, MHS took a proactive approach by creating a special reptile room complete with suitable habitats for different reptile species. Staff are also trained to correctly identify, handle and care for a variety of reptiles and amphibians. Shelters can increase animal comfort and decrease stress by offering sufficient space, water and hiding places. There should also be basking lamps that provide the correct temperature and appropriate UVB lights. Desert-dwelling reptiles should have rocks to climb and bask on, and tropical reptiles require vivariums that are sufficiently humidified and contain foliage that mimics habitat.

In Florida, the FWC attempts to help shelters reduce the number of abandoned and surrendered reptiles it receives by offering scheduled “Exotic Pet Amnesty Days.” During these events, members of the

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— MELISSA KAPLAN

answers calls and emails from desperate people trying to rehome unwanted animals. “A lot of breeders and pet stores don’t disclose how big [tortoises] can get, how much they can eat or how aggressive they can be,” she says.

The general public’s inability to care for reptiles as they mature, ignorance about wildlife laws and tendency to abandon animals they can no longer care for are a challenge for animal care and control agencies. Bruce

public can relinquish non-native animals who may be unwanted or unpermitted without penalties. Barraco’s agency provides information and assistance to Florida animal shelters and also runs a toll-free hotline to field questions from the public about adoption, relinquishing and reporting abandoned or escaped exotic species.

In Malibu, Calif., American Tortoise Rescue (ATR) co-founder Susan Tellem cares for close to 100 surrendered turtles and tortoises and regularly



These baby sulcata tortoises were being sold to the public at the 2009 National Reptile Breeders Expo in Daytona Beach, Fla. Sulcatas can grow to weigh between 100-200 pounds and live to be more than 100 years old.



A panther chameleon perches on top of basking lamp at the 2009 National Reptile Breeders Expo. Originating from Madagascar, these chameleons are a challenge to maintain in captivity.

Dangerfield, an animal control officer in Vero Beach, Fla., has encountered his fair share of pet reptiles let loose as they outgrew their habitats. “Parents buy these animals for their kids. The animals are bright and pretty and in a 10-gallon tank that they outgrow in a few months. Within a year, that 2-foot Burmese python can grow to 7 feet but can’t fit in that 10-gallon tank anymore.”

Dangerfield’s scenario perfectly describes what happened in 2012 when Milwaukee Area Domestic Animal Control (MADAC) discovered a 5-foot, 70-pound pet alligator in Lee Rau’s home. Rau claimed he didn’t know it was illegal to keep the animal and revealed that “Wally Gator” was becoming a challenge to contain. “When it started getting bigger, we had to keep moving him from cage to cage, so we were surprised too when it got that big,” Rau told the media after the animal was confiscated that August. MADAC field supervisor John McDowell told television station WTMJ that discovering Wally Gator wasn’t that weird. “It’s kind of interesting, because we may not see one for two, three or four months. And then all of the sudden in a month’s time we’ll get three or four of them.”

“These animals are already in our communities—the problem is already there,” says Nash. “By not talking about this problem, we’re contributing to the status quo.”

It’s a problem that once seemed exclusive to Florida but is now creeping and crawling into the most unlikely cities and towns. “We see more reptiles than hamsters,” says Salt Lake County Animal Services spokeswoman Sandy Nelson.

Nelson’s not alone. In April 2013, a reptile dealer abandoned at least 35 Argentine tegu lizards in the Florida panhandle community of Panama City. Terrified residents in one neighborhood were spotting lizards who weighed 30 pounds and measured 4 feet long. In 2011, a woman surrendered seven illegal reptiles to the Hawaii Humane Society. One year later, the Nebraska Humane

### For more information

- Colorado Reptile Humane Society offers habitat and care guidelines for more than 25 different types of reptiles and amphibians. The organization’s adoption application and recommended habitats and care requirements are available at [corhs.org](http://corhs.org).
- Larry Perez’s *Snake in the Grass: An Everglades Invasion* relates the full story of the introduction, discovery and implications of wild Burmese pythons in the Everglades.
- American Tortoise Rescue provides information about turtle and tortoise rescue and care. The site offers general care sheets for different tortoise and turtle species, describes various turtle health issues and offers links to reptile veterinarians throughout the United States. ATR is the creator of World Turtle Day, an international event to help educate the public about turtles and tortoises ([tortoise.com](http://tortoise.com)).
- Reptile expert Melissa Kaplan’s website ([anapsid.org](http://anapsid.org)) offers complete information about captive reptile care and behavior and details proper feeding, habitat cleaning and disinfection techniques.
- Both Bryan Christy’s *The Lizard King* and Jennie Erin Smith’s *Stolen World: A Tale of Reptiles, Smugglers and Skullduggery* provide a glimpse into the nefarious world of reptile smuggling.
- The University of Florida has produced the *Large Constrictor Quick Reference Guide* with illustrations noting the head markings, body patterns and general characteristics of various pythons, anacondas and boa constrictors, and the *Nonnative Reptiles in South Florida Identification Guide*, which can help animal care professionals learn to recognize common exotic reptiles iguanas, tegus and Nile monitors. Both are free—find them online by searching by title.

Society seized more than two dozen venomous snakes being kept as pets; and a January 2013 drug bust resulted in Alameda Animal Control removing a 5-foot caiman (a smaller crocodylian) who was being used to guard a California drug dealer's pricey stash.

Ilka Daniel, who serves as the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County's director of animal protection, says communities need to take a long, hard look at the financial, environmental and public safety risks that can spring up when pet stores and exotic pet dealers are allowed to operate with little to no regulation. Her shelter worked with state and local authorities in 2004 when a local reptile dealership suddenly closed, leaving behind more than 200 reptiles and hundreds of rodents. The bill for veterinary examinations, tests, consultations, after-hours care and, in some cases, euthanasia, added up to \$10,000, not counting the costs the shelter incurred while caring for the 81 reptiles it was able to place.

In communities where reptile sales are the source of increasing cruelty issues, local shelters and animal control agencies should be pushing the issues with their own state and local governments. "We don't talk enough about animals being pumped into the pet trade," says Nash.

While many reptiles can cause problems, some species of large constrictor snakes are particularly dangerous to our communities and natural resources. The U.S. Geological Survey identified nine invasive species—including Burmese pythons, which have already wiped out up to 99 percent of native mammals in some parts of the Everglades—that are already established or pose a risk of becoming established in the U.S. The Obama administration banned the import and interstate transport in just four of these nine species, leaving most of the problem (including boa constrictors and reticulated pythons) unchecked.

"When you consider the danger to humans, the damage to the environment and the suffering that the snakes themselves endure in the trade, the case for a trade ban for all nine of these giant snakes is clear-cut," says Michael Markarian, chief program and policy officer for The HSUS. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in partnership with many organizations, has spent more than \$6 million since 2005 attempting to combat the growing problem of Burmese pythons and other large invasive constrictor snakes in Florida.

### Reptiles and Shelter Safety

The deluge of reptiles entering communities across the U.S. means animal control agencies and shelters must develop identification, handling and capture protocols to help their officers and animal care teams stay safe.

With so many morphs on the market, correctly identifying a particular species can be a challenge for even the most experienced animal care professional. Spotting the difference between native and non-native species as well as venomous and nonvenomous animals is critical to safe capture and containment. While several excellent reptile identification guides are available online, Dangerfield advises humane agencies to play it safe and develop relationships with trustworthy reptile experts, along with trained fish and wildlife officials and zoologists. He says animal control officers who are inexperienced at reading or handling reptiles risk bites, scratches and tail whippings if they don't understand the species they're handling, or which types of equipment to use. His advice is simple: "Let experts identify and help with the capture so the animals can't hurt you."



Bearded dragon Mooshu was surrendered to the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County in 2013; he'd originally been purchased for a child who eventually lost interest in the animal.

With only one animal control officer familiar with reptile handling and care, Salt Lake Animal County Services is looking to increase both knowledge and safety by hosting a reptile handling and care workshop for its employees. "We want more of our staff to feel comfortable around reptiles," says Nelson, whose agency occasionally houses reptiles until they can be transferred to a local rescue.

Anyone handling reptiles will also need a quick lesson on salmonella. The bacteria live harmlessly in the gut of most reptiles, but can cause illness and death to humans. "People should just assume that a reptile has salmonella," says Casey Barton Behravesh, deputy branch chief of Outbreak Response and Prevention for the Division of Foodborne, Waterborne, and Environmental Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Most researchers believe that up to 90 percent of all reptiles



A variety of snakes available for sale at the 2009 National Reptile Breeders Expo. Most reptiles are sold cheaply to stimulate sales of reptile supplies like cages, food and basking lamps.

carry salmonella in their digestive tract and that it's periodically shed through their feces. The CDC suspects more than 70,000 people contract salmonella from reptiles each year.

Barton Behravesh says using hand sanitizer after working with reptiles is OK "in a pinch," but advises shelter personnel and volunteers to thoroughly wash their hands after holding an animal or cleaning a habitat. To prevent cross-contamination of other areas, shelters should disinfect tubs or sinks where animals or supplies are also washed, she stresses. Salmonella outbreaks have also occurred after handling feeder rodents, so Barton Behravesh says thorough hand washing is a must after feeding snakes or other carnivorous reptiles.

Staff should be reminded that reptiles are wild animals and can act unpredictably, especially as they hit sexual maturity. Green iguanas, one of the most popular reptile pets, can exhibit dangerous biting and tail-whipping behaviors. While regular socialization and proper handling may help,

some vets are now sterilizing iguanas to reduce aggression, improve health and prevent unwanted offspring. While iguana spaying and neutering is possible, these procedures are still considered controversial.

### Responsible Reptile Adoptions

The HSUS believes that certain species, including constrictors, caimans and venomous animals, are not appropriate pets and should be placed with sanctuaries or accredited zoos. If your agency is going to place other reptiles, staff need to be prepared with reptile care and behavior information for adopters.

"All reptiles are different. There's no one care sheet for all of them," explains Danielle Martinez, an adoption counselor with the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian

River County. As a former reptile rehabilitator, Martinez has seen animals suffering the effects of improper housing, lack of lighting and heat and malnourishment resulting in bone deformities, illness and death.

**Animal control officers who are inexperienced at reading or handling reptiles risk bites, scratches and tail whippings if they don't understand the species they're handling.**



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Animal control officer Bruce Dangerfield and Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County staffer Maria Ramirez scan a Burmese python for a microchip.

“Reptiles in captivity face dangers from uneducated neglect. The more [shelter staff] can learn, the more we can share. We need to be educated before we educate the public,” says Machado. Reptiles can be more challenging to adopt out than their more cuddly counterparts, so adoption counselors might need to up their game.

“Unfortunately, many reptiles wind up spending their days alone in a guest bedroom or garage,” laments Daniel, which is why she stresses the importance of providing even the scaliest creature with attention and environmental enrichment. Examples of smart guidelines include the CoRHS’ policy of screening adopters by individual species and setting minimum standards for habitats and care, and ATR’s policy of only adopting aquatic turtles to homes with suitable ponds. “I refuse to place turtles in tanks,” Tellem says.

Shelters choosing to transfer reptiles to rescue groups should carefully screen those organizations to ensure the animals are responsibly rehomed and aren’t being used for breeding.

Counseling adopters about salmonella and proper hygiene is critical. “Most people who get sick don’t realize it’s the reptiles, because the reptiles aren’t sick. They look completely healthy,” explains Barton Behravesh.

Both the CDC and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) believe some reptile adoptions are inappropriate. “Young children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with compromised immune systems such as diabetics are the ones most likely to become ill,” says

FDA spokeswoman Megan Bensette. Tellem says she’s alarmed by turtles kept as classroom pets and the salmonella threat they pose to small children.

Shelters should also do their best to educate adopters about the behavior of different reptiles. Nash believes that while we may not all be able to read reptiles as readily as dogs and cats, “most people can really get to know these animals and understand their needs.”

Counselors can show adopters how to safely pick up a reptile and support the animal’s body. Demonstrating proper reptile handling can reduce negative behaviors like biting, scratching and tail-whipping exhibited by larger reptiles like iguanas and monitors. Encourage adopters to provide the animal with greater psychological stimulation via environmental enrichment. And like other animals, most reptiles should leave the shelter microchipped (in some cases, this will need to be performed by an experienced exotics veterinarian).

Even with ample enrichment, reptiles can display aggression as they reach sexual maturity, begin to shed or enter a mild state of hibernation known as brumation. Adopter injuries and animal returns can be prevented by teaching individuals how to spot physiological and behavioral changes that may swiftly change an animal’s temperament.

### Bigger, Meaner, Rarer, Hotter

While many reptile enthusiasts simply enjoy the novelty of keeping and caring for an unusual pet, shelters and animal control agencies need to be on the lookout for individuals who want reptiles for the wrong reasons. According to Bryan Christy, a journalist who explored the dark side of the reptile trade in his book *The Lizard King*, some “hobbyists” seek out “bigger, meaner, rarer and ‘hotter’” animals—slang with the dual meaning of “venomous” and “illegal.”

Dangerfield has watched this trend gradually develop. “People start out with a ball python or iguana and then move on to more dangerous animals.”

The number of illegal and dangerous reptiles kept, bred and smuggled into and out of the U.S. underscores the importance of shelters reaching out to experts and wildlife officials familiar with identifying exotic reptiles and brushing up on local, state and federal exotic animal laws. One of the oldest federal laws is the Lacey Act, on the books since 1900, which makes it illegal to import, export or acquire animals or plants sold in violation of U.S. or foreign laws.

State and local laws can vary dramatically. In Florida, some steps have been taken to rein in reptile owners. Several python species, green anacondas and Nile monitors may no longer be bought, acquired or

sold by individuals as personal pets, but animals acquired prior to 2010 can be grandfathered and labeled as “conditional species.” Conditional reptiles must be licensed and microchipped, and owners must file an incident/disaster plan with the FWC. Fears of these exotic reptiles escaping are so great that Florida now requires conditional reptile species to be double-bagged and placed in a secure container whenever they are being transported. Daniel has seen larger reptiles moved in specially made wooden boxes secured with a lock, foot lockers, trunks and even modified caskets.

Yet even with mandated licensing and microchipping, amnesty events and free classes offered to the public on reporting exotic reptiles, it’s estimated there are more than 10,000 large non-native snakes loose and slithering around the Sunshine State, with thousands more iguanas, tegus, monitors and other non-native lizards basking on golf courses, running through parking lots and dozing in trees. Florida’s dire situation is

what Nash calls an “extra-special mess,” and should be a warning to other states.

Environmental, health and safety concerns are all important, but humane agencies need to also focus on the ethical issues surrounding reptile neglect and abuse—even if doing so makes them a bit squeamish. Daniel suspects that the majority of pet reptiles die from neglect. “These are special animals who require a proper environment to live in, and need responsible, suitable homes,” she says.

Nash shares Daniel’s concerns. “I did not grow up with reptiles ... but these animals are fascinating and rich. We should seek to avoid animal neglect and abuse whether it’s with dogs, cats, reptiles or birds. As leaders in animal welfare, it shouldn’t matter.” ■

*Janet Winikoff is the director of education for the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County. She shares her home with husband Mike, cats Momma, Tony and Trouble, and dog Nala.*

“ Most people who get sick don’t realize it’s the reptiles, because the reptiles aren’t sick. They look completely healthy. ”

—CASEY BARTON BEHRAVESH

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