

Q&A: Reptile Expos



What are reptile expos?

- Reptile expositions (reptile expos, expos) are commercial trade events during which reptile pet businesses, and professional and amateur hobbyist breeders offer live animals (mainly reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates) and associated products for sale to other hobbyists and/or members of the public. Other kinds of pet-shows often feature exotic animals, including reptiles, as well.

Where in Canada do expos take place?

- Reptile expos have taken place in one or more locations in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Saskatchewan. Most reptile expos take place in Ontario. Locations that are used for these events include, but are not limited to, convention centers, event halls, community centers and gymnasiums.

Who organizes reptile expos?

- Event production companies, herpetological societies, pet reptile clubs and reptile breeders may be involved in organizing expos.

How many expos are there in Canada?

- In 2019, an estimated 20 events took place. The number of expos varies from year to year. Some larger groups, that host reptile expos at several locations, are in the process of expanding their operations. Other expos appear to be conducted on an infrequent basis.

What types of animals are being sold at expos?

- Reptiles, including but not limited to, a variety of snakes, lizards, turtles and tortoises, as well as a variety of amphibians primarily frogs and invertebrates (mostly a variety of tarantula and scorpion species).

How large are these events and how many animals are being sold?

- The larger expos may include more than 40 vendors, while smaller events may have as few as a dozen vendors. Collectively thousands of individual animals are offered for sale at these events. Conservative estimates place that number at more than 10,000 animals annually.

Are reptile expos regulated?

- Throughout Canada, there are few laws or regulations governing who may own or operate a reptile expo and little, if any, governmental oversight is provided. While municipal business permits may be required to operate or host an event, in most jurisdictions, there are no mandatory standards regarding animal housing, husbandry, management, welfare, transport or human safety.

Are reptile expos inspected?

- While reptile expos have to adhere to municipal and provincial animal care provisions, these events are not regularly inspected. If inspections take place it was triggered by a complaint from the public. Additionally, there are no regulations that mandate expo organizers to have a veterinarian at the premises during the event.

Do expos charge a fee?

- Yes, typically a small fee (i.e., between \$5 and \$15) is charged for entering the expo. Some events will offer free entry to children under a certain age. This is problematic because young children are more susceptible to zoonotic diseases reptiles carry and can transmit to humans.

Do expos allow contact with animals?

- Yes, vendors routinely remove animals from their containers so interested buyers can inspect them more closely. Some vendors will also allow non-purchasing attendees, including children, a chance to touch or have a picture taken with an animal, including holding the animal, having it draped over their shoulder or around the back of their neck. There are animal welfare concerns when the animals are removed from their containers, brought out and handled, sometimes by multiple people, in bright, noisy situations.

Are there animal welfare concerns associated with expos?

- Yes, there is an ever-increasing body of evidence supporting the fact that the kinds of housing provided at reptile expos does not satisfy the needs of the animals and can be damaging to their welfare and health. One study, focussed on housing conditions of Ball pythons, found that provisions for hygiene, mobility, shelter, substrate and water at expos, including at a Toronto-based event, did not meet the minimum welfare recommendations for the species (D’Cruze et al., 2020). Another study conducted in 2012 found that reptiles and amphibians were kept in highly restrictive environments and overexposed to stressful stimuli (Arena et al., 2012). It is now recognized that reptiles are cognitively, emotionally and socially complex and can experience emotional states, including anxiety, distress, excitement, fear, frustration, pain, and suffering (Lambert et al., 2019). Making things additionally problematic is the fact that many reptiles require very specialized husbandry conditions that can be challenging to provide, even in permanent situations. It is not unusual to observe captive stress-related behaviours at reptile expos as they have a repertoire of at least 30 different behaviours which are indicators of captivity-associated stress (Warwick et al., 2013)

Wouldn't the closure of reptile expos result in more animal suffering because you're moving the trade underground?

- Restricting or prohibiting the sale of reptiles and other exotic animals at consumer shows and other similar kinds of events is an important facet of any comprehensive, holistic program aimed at protecting animal welfare, human health and safety and native wildlife populations and ecosystems. It should ideally be done in tandem with the development of meaningful policies, regulations and laws, informed oversight activities and public education. Comprehensively addressing exotic animal issues will

What is travel like for the animals?

- From the time they are removed from their home base until the time they return, reptiles, and other animals offered at expos, may be confined in grossly undersized, minimalist conditions that do little to satisfy their biological, behavioural and social needs. Reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates featured in reptile expos are typically confined to plastic tubs or containers, often with so little space that they are unable to move, make normal postural adjustments or even turn around. During transportation and throughout the course of the event, animals may also be subjected to unusual and often stressful vibrations, sounds, lighting, sights, etc.

Are reptile morphs a problem?

- Many lizards, snakes and turtles are 'designed' to have unusual colours and patterns (i.e., morphs). Intensive breeding practices, including inbreeding (the breeding of closely related individuals), are used to produce morphs and can lead to genetic disorders and physical deformities. An example is star gazing, a neurological condition where a python's head falls back, making the animal look upwards and resulting in difficulties in ingesting food. Wobble head, uncontrollable headshaking is another example. Physical deformities to the spine, skull and eyes known as 'kinks', 'duckbills' and 'bug eyes' may also be found in reptiles.

Are there human safety risks associated with expos?

- While some animals can pose a potential threat to the physical safety of humans due to their size, strength or other physical attributes such as sharp teeth or claws, bite force and speed and/or temperament, the majority of animals sold at expos in Canada are relatively small in size and would not be able to inflict significant harm.

Are there human health risks associated with expos?

- Yes, while many expo operators and vendors seem to downplay, dismiss or to be unaware of the potential risks posed to members of the public, most animals carry pathogens that can be transmitted to people and can cause diseases (known as zoonotic diseases or zoonoses). Some animals, such as reptiles and amphibians are known to shed more potentially pathogenic organisms than other animals. Public health agencies advise that vulnerable persons do not contact these particular animals or surfaces they have contacted (since those surfaces may have become contaminated). High risk members of the public include, but are not limited to, children aged 5 and under, the elderly, immuno-compromised individuals, people who have had recent surgery, and pregnant women.

The most significant human health risks at reptile expos is likely Salmonellosis which can cause diarrhea, headache, fever and stomach cramps and can result in septicaemia (blood poisoning). Other zoonotic diseases that have been associated with the keeping of reptiles include Botulism, a serious and life-threatening illness caused by a toxin released by the Clostridium bacterium that causes paralysis and death, Campylobacteriosis (a bowel infection), Leptospirosis (a liver disease) and Trichinellosis (a disease of muscles, the nervous system and the heart and lungs). The severity of these diseases can range from minor discomfort to hospitalization and death.

Are there specific concerns about the location of expos?

- Yes, expos are held in a range of locations which are also being used for other events (e.g., community centres and event halls). Unless stringent cleaning and disinfecting protocols are in place, there are concerns because pathogens (e.g., salmonella) could potentially survive in the venue long after the expo has finished. This can result in visitors to the building becoming ill despite not having been at a reptile expo.

What do public health bodies and similar kinds of agencies recommend regarding the animals being sold at expos?

- Many public health agencies advise that high risk members of society, including children aged 5 and under, those who are pregnant, the elderly and immuno-compromised people, to not come into contact with certain kinds of animals. Others recommend that only domesticated animals with known health histories should be brought into certain kinds of facilities. No public health advisories on this subject suggest that there is no risk or that disease mitigation measures are not necessary.

Reptile-related salmonella outbreaks have occurred in the past, the latest one in Canada was in December 2019. The Public Health Agency of Canada released a notice related to the outbreak of salmonella linked to pet snakes and rodents. The outbreak included over 92 cases across six different provinces. Individuals who became ill ranged from infants to elderly persons up to 88 years of age and six of them required hospitalization.

Is there a risk of coronavirus spread at expos through the animals that are offered for sale?

- Epidemiologists believe that Covid-19 originated in a wild animal. The latest science suggests that the virus was passed from a bat to a pangolin to a person. There is no current evidence that other animals play a significant role in the spreading Covid-19. Therefore, it does not seem that there is an elevated risk of contracting coronavirus at exotic pet expos.

However, reptiles in captivity are known carriers of other pathogens, such as viruses, bacteria and parasites, and in particular of human illness-causing bacteria. Snakes and other reptiles can become vectors (agents which carry and transmit infectious pathogens) of disease while seeming perfectly healthy and unaffected themselves. Vendors at expos, and anyone who comes into contact with them or surfaces these animals have touched, is at risk of contracting zoonotic disease.

Sources:

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