



Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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The Special Needs of Classroom Reptiles

Why keeping one may not be a good idea.

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To many teachers, keeping a reptile in the classroom seems like a great idea - they are very interesting, can be used in numerous activities across the curriculum (language arts, math, science, art, etc.), and may be used to motivate students. Sounds great, right? Well, I urge you to please think again, taking into consideration the following...

General Keeping Issues

Many people have a difficult time keeping reptiles at home. The reptile's physical needs demand space, electricity, and room enough for the keeper to be able to get into the tank to thoroughly clean and disinfect it. Multiple electrical outlets--and increased electrical bills--are essential to be able to provide the heating and lighting required which, for many reptiles, must be provided 24 hours a day, each and every day of the year. A convenient place to store cleaning and disinfecting supplies is required, and provisions must also be made for keeping or storing the reptile's food. Depending upon the reptile, that may require freezer or refrigerator space, or another tank or two of feeder insects or fish. Since our animals are what they eat, the feeder insects and fish themselves must be provided with regular cleaning, proper food, and water. Fresh water must also be available to provide drinking and soaking water, humidifying sprays, and cleaning and disinfecting.

While there are some reptiles that are considered by experienced herpetologists and herpetoculturists to be "easy," few, if any, are really as easy as people who have never kept reptiles believe. You cannot, for example, leave most reptiles for more than a day.

Even if the animal doesn't require daily feeding, the enclosures, water, and food should be regularly checked for feces and spoiling. Many species require specific humidity levels to be maintained; in the absence of drip or mist systems, daily spraying is necessary.

Enclosures must be checked daily to make sure that the lights and heaters are working properly to maintain the necessary temperature gradients. Many reptile owners have gone away for the weekend only to return home to find their reptiles dead, bloated and decomposing from high ambient room air temperatures that unexpectedly increased the temperature inside of the enclosure. Others come home to find their reptile suffering from dehydration due to the lack of sufficient humidity, or with feces deposited in the rotting food or water bowls. Lights burn out, leaving the reptile in the cold and dark. Worse, some lizards and snakes are so adept at exploring their environments that their surprised owners come home to find their animal surrounded by shattered glass, fallen rocks or branches, or completely redecorated enclosures. Fires have been started by bored lizards looking for something to climb on and by cold lizards trying to get closer to their heat lamps.

Classroom Keeping Issues

Heating and Lighting

At home, you can provide all the heating and lighting necessary for the animal around the clock. At schools, all too often the heat or air conditioning is shut off at night and on weekends, leaving animals to freeze or overheat.

When the teacher provides dedicated heating and lighting equipment for the enclosures, it may not be enough when the facility heating or cooling is shut off. In schools, when the facility staff shuts off lighting and heating at night and they are not reinstated until the following school day, there is an often a big difference between the day and night temperatures, enough to make the existing heating equipment or ventilation in the enclosure grossly inadequate.

Facility/Classroom Layout

School facilities do not always lend themselves to the proper care and maintenance of reptiles in the classroom. There is usually a paucity of electrical outlets where they are needed. There is generally no place to tear the enclosure apart for a regular round of thorough cleaning and disinfection. In today's overcrowded classrooms with multiple activity centers, there is often not enough room for a properly sized enclosure. There may also be a lack of facilities to store frozen, live, or fresh foods.

Many classrooms do not have hot and cold running water. Enclosures for many reptiles are too large to be carried out of the classroom and down a hall to a bathroom or maintenance area to be regularly cleaned and disinfected. There may not be an appropriate or convenient place to safely dispose of feces-contaminated substrate, paper towels and water.

The overcrowding poses another problem: fire hazards. Too few electrical outlets in--or not enough power supplied to--the classroom, results in too many things being plugged into too few outlets. If you are lucky, you may just blow a fuse. If you are not, you may burn down the building. Keeping combustible materials - papers, art supplies, books, etc. - within a couple of feet of lighting and heating equipment is also a hazard. Thus, the area in which your reptile enclosures will reside must be kept free of hazards and have sufficient electrical resources. If you do not have the room, don't get a reptile.

Food and Feeding

Many reptiles require fresh food or defrosted frozen foods. Many are messy eaters requiring either separate feeding containers or enclosure cleaning after some or all feedings. Many reptiles eat daily; others must be fed several times a week. Most classrooms are not equipped with refrigerators, and many of the other teachers and cafeteria staff may be less than open-minded about sharing their refrigerators with a bag of frozen or thawed mice, or bins of worms or beetle larvae, not to mention how the Health Department may feel about it. Food that cannot be kept at room temperature in the classroom or elsewhere in the school will have to be brought from the teacher's home each feeding day and kept at the proper temperatures in coolers until feeding time.

Respecting the Animal's Natural Cycles

Many people are disappointed because their reptile is always hiding. Some actually take out all possible hiding places and change the substrate to paper in the effort to make their animal more visible. Unfortunately, for an animal whose nature is to burrow and hide or sleep away the day, this usually results in a sick and highly stressed animal. Other people are disappointed because the reptile just, well, sits there, often unblinking, for long periods of time. So they poke or prod or make noises trying to get the animal to move or react. This too results in a stressed, often sick, reptile.

Some reptiles are diurnal, others nocturnal. Some spend most of their time in the wild buried underground or under ground cover, logs or in rocky crevices; others spend as much time as they can disappearing into the foliage or blending into rocky outcroppings or grassy hummocks. Some spend most of the day with just the tip of their nose and perhaps a bit of convex shell visible above the surface of the water. Trying to force an animal to adapt to the classroom's attention span, interests, and schedule will not work. The animal's natural daily cycles must be respected and their hiding needs provided for.

When you provide the proper environment for many species, very often you will end up with what looks like an empty, lifeless enclosure sitting in the classroom. Over time, watering is delayed or forgotten. Feedings may be skipped as everyone loses interest and other activities take priority. The reptile becomes objectified as boring and perceived as not having any needs. Many reptiles may live a surprisingly long time while being subjected to poor, or even absent, care. Ultimately, however, there is only one possible outcome if the animal's environmental and psychological needs are not met. While death is a natural part of life, and students should learn that not providing proper care will result in the death of an animal, so much more may be learned by keeping the animal properly and discussing why certain animals may be inappropriate for classroom keeping.

Weekend and Vacation Caretaking

Facility staff have enough to do--feeding and cleaning enclosures on weekends and during school vacations is not generally part of their job description. It should not be a part of their job routine unless they are trained in the needs and care of the particular animals--and if they agree to do it and do it conscientiously. When done less than conscientiously, or in a haphazard manner, the animals starve, are left too long in their own waste products, or go too long without proper water or humidity, all with potentially lethal effects. Such care

tells the students that reptiles and, by extension perhaps, all animals, are objects to be dealt with according to convenience and inclination, not living beings with needs that must be met.

Many teachers take their animals home over the weekend, either transporting the animal in its classroom enclosure, or having a duplicate setup at home in which to place the animal. Still others come into school at least once every weekend, and every day or two during longer vacation breaks, to check on the animals, feed and water them, and perform enclosure maintenance duties.

Sending the Reptile Home with Students: Not a Good Option

Some teachers send their animals home with their students over vacations or weekends. On the face of it, this sounds like a wonderful idea: when used as a reward, it can motivate students. Unfortunately, most animals are sent home to parents who are complete unprepared for the responsibility these animals entail. The animal is sent without the proper equipment and so does not get the right heat, lighting, food or security over the weekend.

Most teachers cannot afford to have two or three of everything in case crucial and expensive things like light bulbs, fixtures, water bowls, and vivaria are broken while in transit or at the student's home.

Provisions are rarely made to ensure that the animal will get necessary veterinary care if anything happens to it while in the student's care. Students and their parents are often unable or unwilling to provide food for the animal, especially if it requires buying live food such as crickets, or storing a supply of mice in the family freezer.

Issues of improper environment and physical risks to the reptile aside, there is another important factor, that of stress. While you are in the classroom, you are able to oversee the handling of the animal, supervise or handle yourself the daily cleaning and feeding chores, and you learn to recognize when the reptile is stressed. Weekend parents will not have this knowledge or experience. The result may be a reptile that spends the entire weekend hiding in the cold part of its enclosure (when not being mauled by your student's siblings and all the children in the neighborhood--and the parents and their friends), an animal who will not eat, and for whom it may take several days after being returned to the classroom before it returns to normal. Repeated experiences of this nature over the course of a semester will ultimately lead to a highly stressed animal who eventually gets very sick from systemic bacterial or parasitical infections.

Emergency Preparedness

What will happen to classroom reptiles and their enclosures during emergencies is something that needs to be thought through and planned for before the reptiles are installed in the classroom. Responding appropriately to fires, floods, earthquakes, chemical spills and other emergent situations is something all teachers must be prepared for in regards to the safety of their students. Adding classroom animals to the mix, especially animals other students, faculty and emergency response personnel may be afraid of, complicates an already stressful and complicated situation.

There are some steps you can take to reduce the risk of injury to the students and animals. For example, shattered glass from enclosures may cause injury to students who have to walk or crawl over it; Plexiglas(r) may break but will not shatter or form the dangerous shards as does glass. During earthquakes, large, heavy objects can "jump" off of surfaces, sometimes being thrown high enough that they pass over objects in front of them without touching them. Enclosures must be secured to their surfaces to prevent them jumping off or falling over and hitting or crushing students.

Evacuating live animals from the classroom must also be planned and prepared for. From keeping carriers suitable for safely packing and transporting the animals, to assigning someone who will be responsible for packing up the animals and removing them to a safe location, to making sure that someone is responsible for seeing to it that these animals are cared for, with provisions made for heating, water and food, during the hours and days following such emergencies, is an essential part of pre-acquisition consideration and planning.

Getting Discouraged?

Keeping a reptile in a classroom poses peculiar difficulties not experienced by those keeping such animals at home. Keeping reptiles in general requires the establishment of daily and weekly routines to incorporate care and maintenance into your regular schedule. Incorporating them into a classroom takes some special effort

and juggling in an already busy life. The fact that it can be done, and done well, is attested to by the fact that there are teachers out there who keep one or more reptiles in peak condition. Too often, however, the opposite occurs. Keeping live animals of any type should only be attempted when you are fully committed--in time, finances, equipment, and space--to them.

The above is excerpted from the introduction to my master's thesis, *Classroom Reptiles*. I undertook this project as a direct result of the horrors I have seen in the classroom in the way reptiles are kept and treated. I have also had my share of having neighborhood youngsters appear at my door, long after the pet stores have closed for the night, clutching a lizard or snake that they were given for the weekend, asking me to provide them with suitable food and housing for them, and have seen what still others were sent home with: too small enclosures, no heat, scanty information (if any) for the parents. Children who see reptiles cared for and shunted around like this do not learn to properly care and respect them. It is my hope that reptiles will be incorporated only if and where it can be done so properly: with the teacher walking into it eyes open and prepared to personally care for the reptile, or directly oversee the care, not only during the school days, but on school nights, weekends and holidays as well.

It is my recommendation that, if the reptile is going to be sent home with a student over vacation or long weekends, that the teacher make a site visit to the home, and discuss with the parents the specific needs of the animal, what they need to house the animal or what will be provided with it, rules or specific guidelines on handling, establishing and following daily schedules/routines, and what do to in case of emergency. In addition, the teacher should visit the student's home during the course of the holiday or vacation to assure that the animal is being cared for properly.

Inconvenient? Yes. A hassle? No doubt. But so is replacing a dead animal and explaining to your class why the animal died, or has stitches, or has lost a tail, or why it can no longer be kept in the classroom...

Okay, you've decided that keeping a reptile in the classroom is doable. So, which one is good to start out with? Many parents, humane societies, and school administrators believe that using animal artifacts and modeling is as effective as using live animals and taking a more hands on approach. For information on the research on this and related topics, please read *The Use of Reptiles in Public Education*.

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