



Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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Reptiles are not "things"

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"Don't be ridiculous!" several of my friends said to me months ago when I told them that, based on the odd behavior of my iguana and three of my snakes, we were going to have an earthquake. Which we did, two days later on Wednesday afternoon and early on the following Friday morning. The following weekend I brought my iguana along on a trip to Northern California. His behavior was again abnormal and, yes, there was an earthquake early Sunday morning.

Behavior observation has been used by man for thousands of years to learn and track changes in the weather and the seasons. Some scientists are also tracking animal behavior data as another variable in the difficult task of predicting quakes. Long-term primate observations by Goodall, Fossey and Galdikas (to name but a few) have added to our body of knowledge and revised our thinking about how our remote ancestors may have acted, and interacted, with each other and their environment.

Observing behavior is an integral part of our life when we have children or animals. Consciously or not, you see your child is unusually cranky or quiet, subdued or hyperactive. Observing the behavior of animals is no different. Through careful observation over an extended time, we notice physical changes: a subtle color change, change in appetite, in sleeping patterns, the amount of water drunk or frequency of drinking or soaking, excessive grooming or lack of it; apathy, dull eyes, skin or coat; wheezing, thin clear mucous in the mouth and around the nostrils. Interactive behavior may also change, with the animal seeking more or less contact with you or other animals, restlessness, roaming, hiding, searching, abnormal mild or severe aggression towards you or others in your family - these changes tell us that something is wrong.

As animals cannot communicate verbally, we must determine if the cause is external, such as change in the home or other physical environment, or a physiological disease or illness manifesting itself. Having spent more time interacting with mammals, most people see nothing but a blank stare when faced with a reptile, especially with snakes, and so do not recognize signs of illness or unease, of contentment or boredom.

The very idea of snakes and lizards having distinct personalities--of being individuals--strikes many people as completely crazy. Those of us who recognize such distinctions in our reptiles are not stuck in some Disneyized version of Rudyard Kipling's stories. I have found that when someone considers reptiles as "things," they are unable to see any differences in the animals. Many people are unable to see anything but some generic frightening creature from a horror show. Those of us who interact with our reptiles as others do with a bird or mammal see reptiles as individuals with specific preferences and attitudes.

People who buy relatively inexpensive reptiles and amphibians are unlikely to buy the equipment and supplies required to keep that animal healthy and alive. An iguana may have cost only \$30, but the tank will cost \$75 to \$100, a Vitalite bulb and hood \$50, a light bulb for additional heat and a reflector housing another \$18. Since most people won't even spend the \$30 or so needed to set up a \$5 lizard properly, it is no wonder that the majority of reptiles sold in this country die within their first 12 months in captivity.

I presently have 49 reptiles (including 20 iguanas), five birds and a couple of invertebrate feeder colonies. Most of these animals are rescue animals, coming from an environment in which they were abused or neglected, or no longer wanted because they were no longer "cute." Except for the crickets, beetles and worms, each of my animals is recognizable by his or her appearance and behavior - how each responds to being handled, when meeting strangers, in noisy, active crowds and in how they explore their world.

Most of us who work with rescued reptiles and amphibians would really rather not have all of these animals. But as long as people indiscriminately buy them, we will end up taking care of their mistakes, animals disposed of with little more thought than they give to putting out the garbage.

Unfortunately, most people spend more time thinking about buying inanimate things such as cars, televisions

and toys than they spend thinking about buying a living being. The viewing of reptiles and amphibians as "things" has led the public and, sadly, many people in the pet trade, to treat these animals as disposable items. "Things" do not feel, have needs, or think. When "things" break (or die), they can be thrown out and replaced. Being cold-blooded, reptiles and amphibians can take a very long time to die. With so many dying within a couple of years of purchase, most people assume that the "thing" has lived out its life, not realizing that lack of care was responsible.

To my mind, impulse buys should be saved for things like bittersweet chocolate, not animals. Caring for an animal is an investment in the future, a path to personal growth. I feel privileged to share my home, and a significant portion of my time and limited financial resources, with reptiles and amphibians, no less than I did when I was owned by cats and dogs and a variety of other mammals.