



## Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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# Rescuing Reptiles From Pet Stores

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At the risk of sounding stony hearted, I ask everyone to consider this: If nice people like you, who feel sorry for every sick and dying hatchling ball python, shell-rotted tortoise, or "preowned" adult iguana found in the pet stores, keep bailing these pet stores out by buying the animal or using your time, money, and/or supplies, restoring to health the reptiles that the store will then sell (at a profit) once you "fix" it for them, *what exactly has that store learned?* They will have learned that there is always someone out there who will do the store's work for them, at their own expense, and so absolve the store of any responsibility for their own actions and behavior.

It was very difficult for me to accept and adopt the position that I am **not** responsible for every reptile out there. I don't have the room, money, or time to take in all the ones that need to be taken in, nor to spend my time and money working on pet store's animals for them. Let's face it: pet store owners may not be rolling in money, but we *know* how much profit they are making on animals and supplies. We *know* that they can easily afford to enter into a working relationship with a competent vet to inspect and treat their animals. So long as we do their dirty work for them, as long as we go in and say, "Please, can I spend my money and time fixing this animal for you so that you will be able to sell it for 2-3 times the amount you paid for it?", there is no incentive for them to change. (And don't even get me started on their buying useless and dangerous products, inappropriately designed enclosures, and products in misleading packaging...worse are the stores who don't even realize that there *are* serious problems in this area!)

We *can* blame the staff and store for these poor iguanas, wheezing and lethargic turtles, starving and tick-riddled ball pythons - they should have sent them back to the wholesaler, or called and demanded replacement animals or at least a discount to offset the vet fees. Just as we should be holding stores responsible, so, too, should they be holding the people they buy from responsible. As long as pet stores continue to accept sick and illegal species, there is then no incentive for the dealers and wholesalers to clean up their act.

You think some pet stores are horrifying? You ought to see the majority of the wholesalers' operations: thousands of animals crammed into tiny cages or bins in dark warehouses, dead, dying and barely alive all commingled together, rolling in feces and urates...But, hey! They're just reptiles and amphibians, so, like, who cares?

Importers, wholesalers, distributors/jobbers, and pet stores are saying that it is the *customer's responsibility* to select appropriate animals and equipment. They refuse to accept any responsibility for their own actions and the lousy advice and information they dispense. From the start of the chain, in some jungle or desert in a remote part of some country, until that animal ends up in your hands, it is *your* responsibility.

Well, it is our responsibility, and not just because they are feeding the public's demand for the exotic. We are the ones responsible for letting them get away with what they are getting away with. But we can start taking more constructive responsibility, by forcing them to accept the responsibility and accountability they have been shoving off onto us.

Start demanding healthy animals, and stop doing their job for them when it comes to what amounts to helping them reduce their bottom line losses.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife won't do it, despite the fact that so many of the reptiles being sold listed as *Threatened* species on CITES Appendix II, because their responsibility ends once these animals clear customs.

The state fish and game departments won't do it as they aren't native (to that state) species.

Most local humane societies, SPCAs and animal regulation departments won't because they themselves don't know much about reptiles or proper care and requirements...and many of the people who work at these places, responsible for enforcing the animal welfare provisions of the state penal code don't enforce them for reptiles because, as one officer said to me, "Reptiles aren't animals, are they?"

There's no one but us, herp owners who are tired of seeing the enormous waste of these "disposable" iguanas, boas, pythons, monitors, chameleons, and more.

## Epiphany

I have recently realized that, by accepting animals people no longer want, especially those who don't want them because they "got too big" ("Didn't you *know* it as going to be 6 [10, 12, 16] feet long?" "Well, yes.") or too mean (like, what did you expect from a Nile monitor bought by a 12 year old kid?), I continue to help the pet stores (and breeders - let's face it, Burmese and red-tail boa breeders aren't doing any better than pet stores, given the astounding numbers of these snakes being dumped, abandoned, killed through neglect, or let loose in city parks) by taking these animals in and trying to find homes for them (usually after treating them for infections, nutritional disorders, external and internal parasites, and taming them). Instead, I am now asking people if they got them from a pet store or breeder. If they did, I tell them to return it. Regardless of the store's return policy. Meaning, if the employee, manager or owner says "We don't want it", the person should just leave it on the counter and walk away. Maybe if the stores start having to deal with thrashy, whippy, crocodile-rolling male iguanas in breeding season, 5 ft. Nile monitors, and 16 ft Burmese pythons with mouthrot and mites, they will start thinking twice about selling those cute little hatchlings...or at least, stop selling them so cheaply ("Look dear, these cute little green things are only \$9.99. Let's buy three or four for Junior in case any die.")

I know that this is not going to find favor with all rescuers (not to speak of all pet stores!). But there are a limited number of no-kill shelters that can handle housing, feeding and treating dozens of full-grown iguanas, pythons, and monitors (and I can't wait until this starts happening: dumping half-grown sulcata tortoises). But the pet trade simply isn't getting the message any other way. Their so-called "experts" who decide what animals they will sell and how to house them and what products to sell for them don't even read the most basic of the beginner books they sell - if they did, they wouldn't be keeping them the way they do, or telling the customers what they do. Maybe if these store owners, and superstore corporate acquisition managers, started feeling the bite (no pun intended), they would indeed become the experts they claim to be...

## Steps Everyone Can Take to Start Effecting Change

First and foremost, lose the complacency. Yes, there is a slowly increasing number of people out here who are proactively trying to make a difference, but we are still too few to yet have a major impact. *Every* voice raised, letter written, complaint filed, will indeed help. The easiest and best thing to do is to start writing letters, and encouraging others to do the same. Writing [Pet Store Complaint Letters](#) will help get you started. Feel free to print this document out and pass it around to other people to help them get started writing letters of their own.

I know how busy life can get, and how easy it is to put off unpleasant and time-consuming things. But the most effective messages will be sent, and powerful points made, by those of you who have actually suffered a loss. Based on the mail I get, there are lots of you out there, and I know that I am only hearing about a tiny fraction of the deaths and crippling injuries.

By the same token, the animals that make it into rescues or shelters represent a fraction of the animals needing help out there. We will never know how many are left to languish, to die from intentional neglect, in a back bedroom or garage or, worse, dumped in a park, field or forest.

As reptile sales have increased every year for the past decade, so too have the number of dumped ones. It is not going to stop unless **we** take the steps needed to make it stop.

So, are you part of the problem, or part of the solution...?