

Should reptiles be sold as pets?

Under-regulation of the pet reptile industry creates problems for consumers

By Ava Kowalski. April 29, 2022.



A tokay gecko for sale at the Northern Virginia Reptile Expo. Manassas, Va. Saturday, April 16, 2022. (Ava Kowalski)

Lauren Miller, a physical therapist from Alabama, had no idea that Chomper, her baby bearded dragon, would end up with muscular dystrophy.

Miller purchased Chomper from a local Petco in January 2021. Everything seemed fine, she said, until his appetite disappeared. Then he stopped moving. "He wouldn't walk, he wouldn't stand up. He would just slither, like a snake," Miller said during an interview for this report.

Miller knew something was seriously wrong with Chomper, but couldn't figure out what it was at first. She didn't bother asking Petco for help because she didn't trust the information the store

provided pet owners, she said. “In my experience, they really don't know anything other than the pamphlets that they give out, and some of those are completely wrong,” she added.

Instead, Miller finally found an answer to Chomper’s problems by surfing Facebook groups for reptile owners. One group administrator pointed Miller towards Sarah Southerland, who runs a bearded dragon rescue center and [Facebook group](#) out of California. From experience handling bearded dragons, Southerland knew immediately that Chomper was suffering from muscular dystrophy.

Southerland explained to Miller that caring for Chomper would entail constant care and syringe-feeding, something that Miller’s busy work schedule would not allow. Miller then had to make the difficult decision to surrender Chomper to Southerland’s rescue center.

Although Miller’s experience might represent an extreme scenario, crowded reptile rescue centers and hundreds of reptile rehoming Facebook groups prove that pet reptiles are constantly surrendered because people cannot care for them.

When evaluating the moral debate on whether reptiles should be kept as pets, the onus is often placed on owners who are unable to provide their animals with the proper care they need. Reptile experts and keepers, along with lax pet store guidelines, suggest that more accountability should be placed on the reptile industry --- those selling the animals -- rather than those buying the animals.

According to D.J. Schubert, a wildlife biologist who specializes in trade at the [Animal Welfare Institute](#), the exotic pet industry entices people to keep reptiles as pets. “They suck you in. They get you interested in this species; that animal then ends up dying because of neglect or lack of veterinary care, or not being fed proper food. And then you go buy another one. So it becomes this hamster wheel, where there's constantly this demand, and it's the demand that keeps the industry alive.”

Although Schubert is adamantly against keeping reptiles as pets, he owns an iguana rescued from an owner who was no longer able to care for it. People who own reptiles, Schubert said, need to understand the biology and behavior of the species, as well as the best husbandry practices in terms of what the animal eats, what environment it needs, and diseases to which it may be susceptible.

“Unfortunately, I don't think enough people do that. I don't think they recognize the responsibility they're taking on when they adopt or purchase an animal like this,” Schubert said. “And, frankly, if you buy him or her at a pet store, I don't think those instructions are nearly sufficient to really properly educate people in the responsible care of these animals to protect the animal's welfare.” One should also be concerned about the conditions under which reptiles are bred for pet stores, Schubert said.

The [Animal Welfare Act](#) is the only federal law in the U.S. that regulates the treatment of animals in research, exhibition, transport, and sale. It does not apply to reptiles or amphibians, so federal inspections don't include reptile breeders or dealers.

[PETA](#) and animal welfare advocates have reported on alleged instances of reptile breeding horror stories. Still, the lack of federal regulation of the reptile pet trade makes it almost impossible to find and thoroughly examine these instances.

Furthermore, despite the [Lacey Act](#) of 1900, which bans the sale and transport of animals illegally taken from the wild, Schubert said, not all reptiles in pet stores come from captive breeding. “I guarantee you, there are far more populations of wild reptiles that are just exploited until they're practically gone for the pet trade.”

“And nobody cares what the impacts are on the population because they're not like lions. They don't have fuzzy faces. They're not hugely popular animals. They're just reptiles,” Schubert said. “And having worked on international wildlife trade issues for a long time, I can tell you: That's how that industry works.”

Under-regulation of the reptile trade is threatening thousands of reptile species worldwide. A 2020 [study](#) published in Nature Communications, which focused on web-based trade, found that 35% of reptile species are traded online. Researchers also found that, online, approximately 90% of traded reptile species, and half of traded individual reptiles, are captured from the wild.

The [spider tortoise](#), for example, is critically endangered due to habitat loss and the pet trade. Spider tortoises are endemic to Madagascar – meaning they cannot be found anywhere else on Earth.

“There's going to be mortality during the capture process. There's going to be mortality while the animals are being held before they're exported. There's going to be mortality during the export process, the transportation process, and eventually, a handful of these animals that are pulled in the wild end up at your local pet store,” Schubert said.

Where do the species of reptiles most commonly kept as pets originate?

You've seen them in pet stores, but have you ever wondered where they actually came from?



"But people don't understand that when they're purchasing that animal, they're contributing to this industry of abuse. And the abuse starts from the moment the animals are caught in the wild."

Because the Animal Welfare Act doesn't technically apply to reptiles, the regulation of captive reptile breeding, selling, and keeping falls to state and local jurisdictions. This also means nearly anyone can operate a pet store with the proper permit and some cash.

In the state of Virginia, for example, breeders and dealers who possess reptiles that fall under a [specific category](#) simply pay a fee and acquire a [permit](#) with the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (formerly known as the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries).

“Its official name is Hold and Sell Certain Fish, Snakes, Snapping Turtles, and Hellgrammites For Sale Permit,” said Randy Francis, the state wildlife permit manager for the Department.

This permit allows residents to own certain native reptiles, sell them, and breed them, Francis said. Stores such as PetSmart, Pet Supplies, and Petco all have Hold and Sell permits from the Department.

Some common native Virginia species are the Eastern kingsnake, red corn snake, and snapping turtles. According to Francis, a Hold and Sell permits cost \$10.

Hold and Sell permit holders don't need to undergo any background checks or inspections, Francis said. "That's it, they just renew their permit. We do no inspections of any of those kinds of facilities unless a valid, credible complaint is made."

Francis does not formally maintain records of instances such as animal seizures from pet stores, or complaints, he said, since it usually just entails a phone call or email to him or the conservation police.

Other exotic reptile species, like pythons and boa constrictors, are regulated by various local counties and municipalities.

Francis recounted an instance in which a Virginia resident used a legal loophole to keep venomous snakes in his Chesterfield County home. Although a Chesterfield County [ordinance](#) prohibits the possession of venomous snakes, the resident was able to apply for a state exhibitor's permit, Francis said. An [exhibitor's permit](#) allows individuals to possess certain native Virginia reptiles -- some of which are venomous.

The Chesterfield county resident was able to obtain the permit, Francis said, because he had applied to become a limited liability company by paying a \$50 fee. "You can be an L.L.C. for 50 bucks. Just by filling out the paperwork and paying, you become a corporation," Francis said. "In his case, we believe he never exhibited them. He had them to show off to his friends," he added.

After the snake owner was bitten several times, once resulting in losing part of a finger, Francis said, he suspended his state permit.



Plated lizards at the Northern Virginia Reptile Expo. Manassas, Va. Saturday, April 16, 2022. (Ava Kowalski)

Hunter Jenkins, a director of the largest reptile rescue in Virginia, [Viper Inc.](#), said that the problem with the reptile industry is that a lot of people don't do adequate research before taking animals home.

He points to sulcata tortoises – which are frequently listed as “great beginner tortoises,” despite being one of the largest tortoise species in the world – as an example. “People buy them when they're very small; They buy them as a Christmas present or a birthday present for their child. And then, 10 years down the road, they're like, ‘Hey, she's almost 75 pounds. And it's digging holes in my backyard,’” Jenkins said. That's where rescue centers like Viper Inc. come into play.

Most animal shelters don't take in reptiles. This means that the options for reptiles that can no longer be cared for are: Being returned to a pet store, which might not take them if it no longer

has space; being released into the wild, which will either kill the reptile or disrupt the environment if it survives; or dying in captivity due to improper care. Viper Inc. works closely with local residents, regional pet stores, animal control units, and the Department of Wildlife Resources to take in reptiles needing a new home.

“I do believe that there are some things that the pet stores or breeders should be doing on their part. And for the most part, a lot of them do,” Jenkins said. “But you do have every bad apple; There's always someone out there that's doing it for the sale.” Potential reptile owners and pet stores working together is vital, Jenkins said. “It's the teamwork the we need.”

One of the pet stores that Viper Inc. works with is [Pet World](#), which has two locations in Southeastern Virginia. For Sheree Boyd, manager of the Hampton location, educating potential reptile owners is the biggest challenge that she faces in her job.

“We definitely tell them as much as we can, but we know that they can't always retain all of it. We do have some care sheets that we'll give to them,” Boyd said. Pet World also operates a Facebook page, where reptile owners can message Boyd or its three other store managers with questions any time of day, she added.

Before sending reptiles home, Boyd said that she asks customers questions about their living situations and their budget. “My goal is to have the animal in a home that it's going to stay in, not necessarily just get the money sale.”

When it comes to Burmese pythons, for instance, which can grow up to 20 feet long, Boyd asks potential buyers if they have small children, or if they understand how large the snakes can grow. Boyd may then suggest a different species that's smaller and easier to manage, she said. “It typically works.”

Reptiles, along with other pets, do get returned to Pet World. “As long as we have space, we'll take them back in,” Boyd said. There's no exact timeframe, but about one pet a week gets returned to the store, she said.



A child's hand rests on a case containing ball pythons. Manassas, Va. Saturday, April 16, 2022. (Ava Kowalski)

Whether reptiles should be kept as pets in the first place is a controversial topic in the herpetology community (herpetology is the study of reptiles and amphibians.)

Caroline Seitz is the education chairperson for the [Virginia Herpetological Society](#), one of the oldest state herpetological organizations in the country. The V.H.S. has no official stance on keeping reptiles, and there are mixed opinions among members, Seitz said. Seitz agreed to speak freely for the article, but said that she was not speaking on behalf of the V.H.S.

Before becoming the education chairperson, Seitz used to operate an animal education business and a reptile rescue organization for over 25 years. “For the last 10 of those years, I was very uncomfortable keeping reptiles anymore,” she said. Seitz then pivoted to a puppet show as a form of wildlife education that didn’t involve keeping live animals.

Seitz also used to assist the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources and local animal control units when pet stores were found in violation of Virginia laws. Violations Seitz witnessed

included selling illegal animals such as caimans or invasive red-eared sliders, she said. She also witnessed pet stores with “horrific” conditions in which she had to help confiscate animals and identify dead ones.

Seitz still grapples with her own moral debate on if she believes keeping reptiles is ethical. “There's a lot people, including myself years ago, who strongly believe that in order to teach people to care about animals, especially snakes and other ‘unhuggables,’ that people need a connection with these animals. And just seeing them on T.V., or seeing a picture, isn't going to quite do it,” Seitz said. “And they have a point; If I hadn't been allowed to pick up, and pet, and keep snakes when I was a little girl, would my passion have carried over?”

“I'm almost 50 years old now, and there is a good amount of people out there who strongly believe that, in order to create more people who will care and conserve the environment, that we need to have captive animals in order to foster that love,” Seitz said. “And I completely used to be that person. I used to be on that side of the fence.” Throughout her career working with captive wildlife, Seitz said, she slowly came to the other side of the fence, and now feels the reality of both sides.

On an April morning, 42 vendors have set up their tables at the Prince William County Fairgrounds for the Northern Virginia Reptile Expo.

Curious passersby's, novice reptile owners, and veteran exotics enthusiasts stroll from table to table, each adorned with rows of glass tanks and plastic Tupperware containers. Some containers hold baby snakes as thin as shoelaces; others are stuffed with coiled-up adolescent pythons; and some house geckos of vibrant shades of green and blue.

As potential customers handle the reptiles and chat with the vendors, the reptiles wait for their fate to be determined. How many of them are going to their forever homes, and how many will get returned or dumped outside? Or worse, how many of them will even live through the end of year? With lax state laws and no federal protection, this is how the industry will continue to operate.