

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Iguanas make great pets — for those who make a commitment before they purchase one. In fact, a commitment should precede the acquisition of any exotic or domestic pet. Pets are completely dependent on their owners for all of their needs, including food, shelter, and veterinary care. Domestic dogs have a life expectancy of 12–15 years, yet animal shelters take in thousands of dogs daily. Iguanas, on the other hand, if properly maintained, will live into their mid-twenties.

During the mid-1980s, hundreds of thousands of Green Iguanas were imported for the pet industry. Most came from Central and South American iguana “farms,” where gravid female iguanas were released into huge enclosures and their eggs were collected. Initially, iguanas sold for \$50 or more. Once the market was saturated, however, the price of a baby iguana dropped to the point where some pet shops were offering free iguanas with the purchase of a ten-gallon aquarium. Importers were selling large numbers of iguanas for as little as 75 cents apiece. This only served to cheapen the quality of care these animals received.

Iguanas belong to a group of animals classified as “impulse” pets. People may visit a pet shop, see an iguana at an inexpensive price, and the next thing they know — they’re pet owners. A quick-talking salesperson can outfit a customer with everything needed to raise an iguana. Sadly, the novelty quickly wears off for most people, and the animals suffer from neglect. Few will actually receive proper care and live long, healthy lives. Contrary to popular belief, zoos and animal attractions cannot take those that survive, and they end up in the hands of the few wildlife rehabilitators who are willing to deal with them. Consequently, many are dumped back on the pet shops or released. Depending on the local climate, the latter may or may not thrive.

In South Florida, the climate is well-suited to exotic wildlife, and the Green Iguana population has exploded (see Newsbriefs, p. 94). Healthy populations of Green Iguanas range from Southern Palm Beach into the Florida Keys. They have taken up residence in several tourist attractions, local parks, and botanical gardens. Even southern Florida is a bit too far north for Green Iguanas to occur naturally, because several days throughout the year are too cold. The past five to seven years in Florida have been unusually warm, causing iguana numbers to grow at an alarming rate.

Despite the warm trend, the temperature dipped to under 40° for several nights this past January, and many Floridians thought that many iguanas would perish. On one cold Saturday morning, I visited a local tourist attraction with a healthy population of

iguanas. The curator said he had found several dozen iguanas sprawled on the ground and that they had been collected and put into boxes. By the time I arrived, it was near noon, and there I stood, camera in hand, ready to document dozens of iguana carcasses. To my surprise, the staff walked out with several huge boxes and began putting them in my truck. Much scratching came from the boxes, and, upon inspection, I discovered that the iguanas were alive! Cold and slow, but alive. So, when you look at the accompanying photo, note that the only way to pose with 10–15 iguanas is for them to be half-frozen.



Photograph by Liza Greenberg.

Remember, the next time you go to a pet shop, beware of impulse purchases.

Joe Wasilewski